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by Elton Webster

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by Harold Gluck

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ALL STORIES BRAND NEW

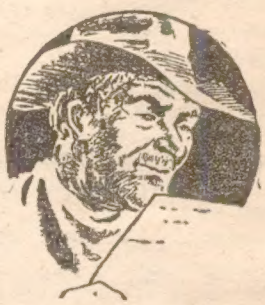
DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 23 February, 1956 Number 3

Featured Novel

SIXGUN SERENADE

by Elton Webster 6



In a wild country, where nearly every man is a part-time rustler, at least, a cow-thief can switch over to the side of justice and make good. Keen Morgan was aware of this—but he never suspected that he'd be making such a turn—or why he'd be making it!

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MILTON LUROS, *Art Director*
MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.* CLIFF CAMPBELL, *Asso. Ed.*

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How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

Keen Morgan was an outlaw and a cow-thief, but there was a limit beyond which he wouldn't go. And when Lew Bradlow wanted to kidnap Jan Tolson, Morgan suddenly realized it was time to switch sides —even though it meant that both rustlers and ranchhands would be gunning for him!

SIXGUN SERENADE

Featured Novel of Outlaw Trails

by ELTON WEBSTER

KEEN MORGAN knew that he was beaten. The cards in his hand were the kind he'd been getting all night: Good enough to bet on, not good enough to win. And luck doesn't change when you're playing with your last few dollars in the world. He smiled, his blue eyes half-shut the way they always were, a wild flash of fire simmering between the slits.

There was no use dragging it out. He went along with the betting until two of the players with good hands forced it beyond his means. He stayed to watch the jackpot pulled in on an ace-high in spades, and then he said, "That cleans me, gents. Goodnight."

He left the game and wandered barwards. He owned the black clothes he stood up in, the Colt at his right thigh, and the saddled bronc that was hitched outside the *Pale Moon Saloon*. But his position didn't worry him. Being broke was nothing to some of the positions he'd been in.

A pretty saloon girl with shiny black hair and eyes to match the blue of his own, sidled up to him at the bar. And fat Sid, the barkeep, waddled along to beam at him the way he beamed at most everybody. The girl said, "Hi, Keen; you gonna buy me a drink?"

He turned his half-shut eyes on her and the humor flashed in them. He said, "Mebbe. A farewell drink, if my credit's good."

Lazily he turned his gaze to Sid, who beamed brighter than ever. Fat Sid said, "On account o' you're Keen Morgan, I'd say your credit's good in most every saloon along the Pecos Valley. Apart from that, I like you. So this one's on the house."

"Make it two," Keen Morgan said, and if Sid wasn't happy about making it two, he didn't complain. Morgan handed a drink to the girl and smiled at her and lifted his own glass in the gesture of goodwill. "To you, Jeannie. It's been fun, huh?"

She nodded slowly, her eyes watching him worriedly, sipped the liquor, and said, "Why're you goin' away?"

"I'm broke," Morgan grinned. "I gotta get some money. It's a cinch I can't get it in Santone; all the people here are my good friends." He laughed at the subtlety of it, and Jeannie didn't understand.

But there were lots of things about Keen Morgan that she didn't understand. She looked at him wistfully. "Will you be coming back?"

Morgan frowned, thinking about it. "No man can say for sure whether he'll be back...ever. Least of all a guy like Keen Morgan. But I ain't gonna forget you, Jeannie, if that's what's worryin' you."

"It ain't only that," Jeannie said. "It's you yourself I'll worry about. For Gawd's sake...be careful, Keen."

Bradlow dropped his gun, and hunched forward.

"I can't promise that, either."

He smiled with a flash of his eyes and tossed off the drink, a little impatient with Jeannie now. Women were always the same. They tried to cling.

He walked away, headed for the door. Jeannie put her unfinished drink on the bar and ran after him. He was unhitching his bronc when she caught him. "Ain't you gonna say goodbye to a gal?" she asked, a little breathlessly. "Or couldn't you...stay in town tonight an' ride in the morning? Couldn't you, Keen."

"Nope. I gotta go see a fella in New Mex. Got a long ride ahead o' me. Goodnight, Jeannie."

He opened his arms kind of reluctantly and she came into them. He returned the kisses she pushed up at him, his hands caressing her back and shoulders. Then he stood her away, swung to the saddle and rode off without looking back.

He headed south out of town, along the trail that curled steadily southwest toward the border of New Mexico. But as soon as the lights of Santone had vanished behind him, he turned sharply off the trail and swung north.

He had no intention of going to New Mexico. But he was a man who, in a hectic twenty-three years of life, had made enemies, and laying a false trail when riding alone was a normal precaution which he always took. Keen Morgan had a reputation for recklessness and contempt of the odds against him. But that contempt for odds was a pose.

The truth was that Morgan usually weighed the odds carefully and demanded a fifty-fifty chance. In his way of life, there were often split seconds of action when he needed luck, and it was his belief that if you didn't put too big a strain on luck all the time, it wouldn't fail you in the pinches.

HE RODE all that night, camped for a meal of tinned stuff from his saddlepack at sunup, and then rode until late in the afternoon.

By then he was sixteen miles up the rugged slopes of the Buttes, a low line of mountains that sprawled to the northern horizon along the shining ribbon of water that centered the Pecos Valley. He had been making for a tall rocky outcrop called the Spike, and now that it was close he took a scribbled note from his pocket and consulted it.

The place he looked for was a sheltered draw, just south of the Spike. Well, this damned country was a maze of draws and ridges. He shrugged. Then he thought: *If I keep moseyin' around long enough I'll be seen. It's a cinch Lew Bradlow an' his boys keep a watch for anyone they're expectin'.*

He rode for another half hour, keeping to the ridges so that he might be spotted. He took the note from his pocket again and reined back to read it. It had been left in his room back in Santone, and he'd read it a dozen times. It was an invitation to come and make himself an easy two thousand dollars; if he hadn't known the spidery handwriting of Lew Bradlow he'd have figured it was a trap. Except, maybe, that no enemy would figure him fool enough to fall into such a trap.

"Don't move, stranger," a voice said. "I got you covered."

Keen Morgan's fingers froze on the paper he held; his mind was delving back into the past, trying to remember where he'd heard that voice before. The voice was smooth and somehow lifeless in a monotone.

His memory clicked and Morgan felt a tremor of excitement. He said, "Toss Riley... fancy runnin' into you!"

He turned in his saddle then, and saw Riley mounted on a grey horse on a ridge above and behind, a sixgun trained from a hand that rested lazily across the horse's neck. Riley said, "But you didn't run into me. I ran

into you, which's plumb different. I've caught you cold, Morgan."

"That's the way it looks," Morgan agreed. "What're you gonna do now?"

They stared hate at each other—the old hate, from away back. Riley said, "You don't really have to ask, do you?"

Morgan flashed that blazing smile from his eyes. He said, "You figure to kill me, huh? Waal, the range's long, an' you might miss with the first shot. An' then we'll see if I'm as fast as folks say, huh?"

"You're bluffin'," Riley's monotonous voice said. "I ain't gonna miss an' you know it. Take it, Morgan."

Morgan ducked and at the same time kicked his heels deep into his bronc's belly. The horse plunged as a bullet burned the back of Morgan's shirt. Morgan dived from the plunging saddle and rolled in the dirt, as if he'd been hit—but when his right hand came out from under there was a Colt in it, spitting savage death.

Three slugs blasted into Toss Riley and he died in his saddle. Morgan lay there, breathing hard, smoke fumes hitting him. He watched the dead man topple slowly from his saddle and slide down the slope of the ridge. Then Morgan got up and beat the dust from his clothes.

He went to look at Riley, three bullets had grouped closely in the hombre's chest. Morgan felt the suddenly tired sickness he'd felt many a time before, after action. He mastered it, put his gun back in its holster, and was returning to his mount when the scrabble of hoofs high to his right claimed his attention.

He stopped and looked up. He raised a hand in greeting. The big man on the scrabbling roan was dressed in sweat-stained buckskin as usual, his face whiskered, his hat a ragged thing with the brim curled up at the front. Morgan would have recognised big Lew Bradlow a mile away.

IT TOOK Bradlow some minutes to reach the standing Morgan. Then he jogged his horse to the fallen Riley, and looked down at the body, and turned his fleshy face toward Morgan with a silent question in his dark eyes.

"It's a fella they called Toss Riley," Morgan said. "We didn't get along."

"You don't have to tell me his name," Bradlow said. Then he jogged his mount back to where Morgan stood. He said, "You damned hellion... what'd you kill him for? I needed that jasper."

"*You* needed him?" Then Keen Morgan understood. He smiled a slow, wondering smile, his lazy eyes opened wider than usual. "I get it. He was one o' your boys, huh? Watchin' for me, an' I killed him. But if I hadn't he'd sure have killed me. He caught me cold, an' threw the first shot."

"Caught you cold, huh?" Bradlow said. "Waal, that sure does sound like Riley. I done told him to go watch for you, an' he never by as much as a blink let on that he knowed you. Was you two enemies, or something?"

"Since three years ago," Keen Morgan said. "There was trouble over a gal in Santa Fe. Riley didn't appreciate me bustin' in the way I did. I done gave him the chance to call me, but he weren't keen to cross guns with me. He pulled outa town an' I never saw him again till jus' now."

"The crooked hellion!" Bradlow said. "He was a mighty clever hand at ropin', an' I sure figured to use him. But when I sent him to watch for Keen Morgan, he saw the chance to wait on you, catch you cold, an' pay off an old score. Then, I guess, he was jus' gonna ride off an' quit me. The hell with him, anyway."

Morgan mounted his bronc. Bradlow led the way, climbing his roan up the slopes to the right of the towering Spike. Bradlow said, "I kinda figured you'd come. Two thousan' dollars ain't to be sneezed at, huh?"

"Not when a fella's plumb broke, which I am," Morgan said. "Figured I'd listen to what you had in mind, anyway. I might like it, an' I mightn't."

"You'll like it," Bradlow said. He was a thick, big-bellied man in his thirties. His toughness and the speed of his gunhand were well known from Tombstone to Santa Fe. He said, "There's jus' one thing, though. Riley's got a pard. One o' my boys, I mean. If he finds out you killed Riley, it might cause trouble."

"That," Morgan drawled, "kinda surprises me—Riley havin' a friend, I mean. But I see what you mean 'bout it bein' awkward, an' I don't wanta bust up your plans any more 'an I've done already. I'll pull out now."

"Wait a minute." Bradlow reined back and turned in his saddle, squinting his dark gaze at Morgan who reined back also. He said, "I want you in on this. Anyway...I been thinkin' about you a lot, ever since we played that Riverbend deal together. I figure we oughta be pards, you an' me. I figure we'd go a long way in this"—he grinned—"this land of opportunity."

Keen Morgan was smiling, the fire playing in the blue of his eyes between the lazy lids. He said, "I'm nobody's pard, Bradlow. Most always I like to ride alone. Any time I team up, it's jus' to do a job an' then drift alone again. That's the way I am. I sure want you to savvy all that, because I wouldn't want you to have any misunderstandin' about anything I do under your direction. Savvy?"

"Sure, sure," Bradlow said, shrugging. "Have it your own way. But mebbe you'll change your mind. Meantime, I want you in on this deal. It's a sure-fire moneymaker."

"But what 'bout Riley's pard?" Morgan asked.

"The hell with him. Somebody shot Riley...how d'we know who did it? Let Kid Chaney find out if he can." He chuckled, deep in his belly. "An' let him cross guns with Keen Morgan if he does find out."

The big man seemed to have changed his mind about the importance of not having trouble in his outfit. But rapid changes of mind were not unusual with Bradlow, Morgan remembered. There were many sides to the big bandit's nature, and for that reason Morgan didn't wholly trust him. The reason he'd come at the invitation of the delivered note was that Bradlow was noted for making crooked money in large quantities. He was no fourflusher, and no piker. When he went into action, it was always for a high reward, and that, to a man broke to the world like Keen Morgan, was a tempting fact.

They climbed more slope, then rode along a ridge away from the Spike. There was a beaten trail leading down from the far side of the ridge, passing between scattered boulders to a sheltered draw. The draw was well timbered and it was enclosed by rocky walls on three sides. It was a good hideout.

BY NOW IT was after sundown. In the sky's afterglow the draw was lit brightly as if by artificial light. There were horses grazing at the grass among the trees, and in a clearing the blackness of a fire gone cold. Men sat about, smoking, a hard bunch of hombres who looked lazily at the boss and the new arrival without speaking. There were five apart from Bradlow and Morgan, and the latter knew none of them by sight.

"Boys," Bradlow said, as he and Morgan dismounted, "meet Keen Morgan. He's gonna work with us...leastways, I'm gonna try an' persuade him to make a couple o' thousan' bucks for himself."

There were curious looks of interest in the tough faces at mention of Morgan's name. There were not many hombres in the whole wild Pecos Valley who hadn't heard of him, and he

The rustlers were unaware of their approach.

guessed that, as folks usually were, they were surprised to find him so young. He flashed his blue-eyed smile and said, "Howdy, fellas."

Bradlow introduced them one at a time, each man nodding with that overcasual manner reserved for big-name gunmen. Their looks plainly said: *All right, so you're Keen Morgan. The hell with you We're hard boys, too.*

There were the two Maynard brothers, Max and Jim. There was a tall Canadian they called Pine. There was a bow-legged, bald little man with a terrible scar across his face, named Shaeter. And there was Kid Chaney, a slim youth in his late teens, blond of hair and reckless of eye. He grinned and said, "Howdy," and spat at the dead fire, and looked at Lew Bradlow and said, "Where's Toss? I thought he'd gone out to to watch for this hombre."

"Must've missed him," Bradlow said glibly. "Waal, he'll be in sooner or later, I guess. Let's start a fire for coffee. An' then we can talk."

Shaeter seemed to be the cook, putting fresh wood on the ash-heap and soon having coffee boiling and bacon sizzling in a pan. And in the dusk, around the fire, with Kid Chaney flicking anxious glances to the top of the draw for Toss Riley who would never

come in, Bradlow expounded his scheme.

"I kinda rounded up each o' you hombres special. I wanted guys who like to make a good killin' an' ain't afraid of a little fightin' if things go wrong. My plan is kinda simple, at that. We drive north along the Pecos as far as the border, then turn east through the Low Hills to the railhead at Benbow. It's a four hundred mile ride. We'll start off with nothin' but our hosses an' packs, but when we reach Benbow we'll have as big a herd o' cattle as we can manage comfortable. Them buyers' agents at the railhead are payin' twenty dollars a head. I figure we'll have a thousand head to sell."

"Sounds dandy," Pine said. "Sounds fine. But are them agents buyin' mixed brands an' no questions asked?"

"Matter o' fact, some of 'em are," Bradlow said, his whiskery face cracked in a smile. "But we'll take no chances. We won't touch branded stuff. We won't need to."

"How d' you figure that?" Max Maynard asked. Morgan knew the answer, but he remained quiet as Bradlow explained.

"I figure there's half a million head o' cattle grazin' on the open range west o' the Pecos. A whole lotta big outfits are there, like the Diamond J an' the Tolson spread, some of 'em so rich they've lost count o' how many steers they're runnin'. The herds run in'to each other an' they ain't got near enough cowhands to keep cuttin' 'em out. Half the time them big respectable cattlemen are puttin' their own brands on other folks' calves. Sometimes it's by accident, sometimes by design. There's plenty o' trouble along the Pecos these days, I'm tellin' you. I kinda been lookin' things over, an' I know.

"Waal," Bradlow went on, "I figure that with all the trouble goin' on, we can make our drive without much risk. A plumb lotta strays cross the Pecos River from time to time an' the outfits west o' the water are too busy to bother about 'em most o' the time.

"Among them strays there's a big lot o' unbranded stuff, an' I figure that by keepin' to the east o' the river an' collectin' the unbranded mavericks we can take a thousan' head. While the big outfits west o' the river are squabblin' over their mixed herds it'll be a cinch. But, o' course, it's rustlin'; an' if we was to be catched at it we'd swing from the nearest tree. That's why I wanted hard hombres who can fight out of a trap if we run into one. Now what d'you say? It'll be worth two thousan' bucks to each o' you when we get to Benbow."

KEEN MORGAN did some mental arithmetic. A thousand head at twenty a time was twenty thousand dollars. Bradlow, then, was figuring to clean up seven or eight thousand for himself. He said, "Looks like you'll show a nice profit, Lew. Seein' that we'll all be riskin' the same necktie party, I figure we oughta get a little more. You could cut us in for two and a half thousan' an' still collect double for yourself."

Bradlow's dark eyes met Morgan's and Morgan knew that their smile was a mask for deep displeasure. But he knew, also, that with the other men naturally out for all they could get, Bradlow wouldn't refuse.

"Two an' a half thousan' each," he said, "even though it was my brains that planned the damned job. Now let's hear. . . are you fellas in or not?"

"I'll play along," Morgan said, and one by one the remaining hombres agreed, until it was kid Chaney's turn to speak.

"I ain't sayin', until I've seen Toss. We're pards, Toss an' me. If he's in, I'm in. Hell—where's he got to? It's time he came in, I figure."

But, of course, Toss Riley didn't

come in, and at sunup next morning Kid Chaney went looking for him. He toted the body back across his saddle and there was a hardness in his young eyes. He buried Riley in the draw and then he wanted to comb the Buttes for Riley's killer. Big Lew Bradlow stepped in.

"Riley had a plumb lotta enemies, Kid. Somebody catched up with him. It happens all the time. You better forget it. I ain't changin' my plans, because I figure to get this drive finished before the fall. If you wanta go lookin' for Riley's killer you're on your own. Now are you comin' with us, or ain't you?"

The Kid swore savagely. Then he said, "All right, I'll come with you. I kinda need the money. But hell—if ever I find out who killed ol' Toss an' I run into gun-range o' him, I'll kill him for sure."

Keen Morgan felt a little uncomfortable, because his was a makeup of curiously mixed scruples and faults. He hated remaining quiet about his killing of Riley while this youngster fretted so. He felt like a skulking heel.

Yet he knew that it was the best way. Because if this damn' fool kid was told the truth he would go for his gun, and Morgan would be forced to kill him. He let it go at that.

Next day the seven rustlers pulled out, beginning the drive.

- 2 -

AT THE END of the first week the outfit had collected better than three hundred unbranded steers. And as Bradlow figured to do the journey to Benbow in four weeks, that was a mighty good start. The job was proving even easier than he'd expected, the broken flats east of the river being alive with strays and as yet not a sign of cowboys anywhere. It looked as if Bradlow had sized up the situation correctly, the riders of the big spreads being too busy on the troubled range west of the river.

Just the same, the seven outlaws were not a happy team.

Kid Chaney never stopped mourning his dead pard, Riley. Morgan wondered that anybody could have loved Riley the way this boy seemed to have done. The tall Pine was a silent hombre who often annoyed the others by failing to answer when spoken to. And Keen Morgan had had a falling-out with Bradlow.

It had happened when Bradlow's roan had cut up nasty one morning, giving Bradlow trouble in the roping and saddling. It was one of those spirited spells liable to happen at any time, as far as a fine horse was concerned. Bradlow had fought the roan with doubled rope, which was resonable enough, since a rider has to be the master of his mount; but when Bradlow lost his temper and continued the belting with cruel ferocity, Morgan had stepped in.

Bradlow paused in his blazing effort, bridle in one sweating hand, the doubled rope in the other. He snarled. "What the hell's this? I'll give this devil a lesson he won't forget. Leave go my arm, blast you!"

"Cool down," Morgan had said. "He's had enough. There's blood along his flanks where you've broke the skin. He'll remember."

Bradlow let the trembling horse go and threw down the rope and faced Keen Morgan. "By Gawd, don't you ever grab my arm like that again, no matter what I'm doin'. Nobody tells me what to do...or ain't you heard?"

"Sure, sure, I've heard," Morgan said easily. "But you kinda lost your temper...an' I figured it was a pity to see a good hoss ruined."

Bradlow had grown pale and tight-faced beneath his wild beard, and a tenseness came into his fingers that spread rigidly from his hanging arms. Keen Morgan read the dark eyes and smiled his blazing smile to say, "Don't be a fool, Lew...a hoss ain't worth it...."

They had stared steadily at each other until, at last, Bradlow's temper fell away and color came back to his face. He had turned back to his horse, mounted, and said, "Let's go fellas... we got some rustlin' to do...."

Bradlow didn't mention the incident again, nor did Morgan. But there was a barrier between them now, unmistakably; and even though they had got round to laugh and talk easily again. Morgan knew that the resentment lay deep.

Morgan had mild trouble with Kid Chaney also. The Kid fancied himself as a gunman, and often wasted lead in snapshots at the twigs of trees or sometimes a tiny animal that ran, confused, from the drum of hoofs. He rarely missed. "I ain't too proud to practise," he would say. "Bein' fast with a gun never hampered anyone in this country."

But his technique of shooting as many as three or four shots from down near his thigh was all wrong, and one day he'd turned his head to catch the gleam of amusement in Keen Morgan's eyes.

The Kid holstered his gun slowly, his face tight. He said, "What's so funny, mister?"

Morgan said, "Kid, don't be thataway. I weren't laughin' at you nasty-like. It's jus' that I kinda got the habit o' smilin', and when I get interested in somethin' I kinda smile wider. and—"

"Yeh, I've noticed that," the Kid said from thin, resentful lips. "Come to the point. What's so all-fired interesting?"

"The way you shoot," Morgan said; "it ain't right."

"Ain't it now?" The Kid sneered. "O' course, you'd know, huh? Keen Morgan, with a line o' notches on his tally. He's the only guy in the country who knows how to shoot, huh?"

"Kid, if I was you'd have nothin' to worry about. Because I don't aim to cross guns with you, ever. But some fine day...the way you're headed... some hombre who *does* know how to handle a hogleg's gonna fight you an' kill you."

The quiet finality of the words had seemed to shock the Kid. And he said, still a little sulkily, "Tell me...where am I wrong?"

"When you draw, keep the gun comin' up," Morgan said. "Throw a quick shot as soon's you like, sure; but have your gun high in front o' you by the time you fire the second. Don't keep pumpin' the lead from down near your thigh. Nobody in the West is that good, Kid."

The kid had shrugged. But later Morgan had seen him using the advised method, and with marked success. Yet he had ignored Morgan after that...

THE SECOND week passed drearily, unbranded strays becoming harder to find, but Lew Bradlow promised that in another couple of days they would be opposite the sprawling Tolson territory and stray beef plentiful.

To Morgan he said, "The Tolson place—the Square T—is the biggest in the Pecos Valley. They run upwards of sixty thousand head, though they've likely lost count. They have a plumb lotta trouble with the Diamond J crowd. Them two outfits are payin' the two toughest ridin' crews in Texas to protec' their stock, and gunfights out on the range are common. I figure we can herd-in a plumb lotta beef that's wandered across the river, without the slightest risk."

"We're drivin' close to four hundred now," Morgan yelled above the thud of hoofs ahead. "D'you figure to bring it up to a thousand outa Tolson stock alone?"

, "Tolson an' Diamond J, sure. You'll see. Them scrubby hills in the distance'll be plumb full o' mavericks. Then we'll drive hard for the border with no more stops, an' east to Benbow. Once away from the river, nobody ain't gonna be able to prove that we're runnin' stole stock anyway."

And again Bradlow proved to be right. They reached the scrubbed and bouldered hills to find them full of strays carrying the Square T brand, and with them a percentage of unbranded yearlings. For two days the band of rustlers worked hard, cutting out the yearlings and joining them to the main herd ahead. Until, at about sundown of the second day, they ran into trouble.

Shaeter came riding hard from a ridge beyond which he'd been searching for mavericks. He reined back in a dustcloud and yelled to Bradlow, pointing back at the ridge.

"Three riders, comin' this way. They crossed the river from the west. Tolson riders, mebbe."

"Three, huh?" Bradlow said. "No more?"

"Only seen three. But hell...where there's three there could be others. We gotta be careful. They'll be over that ridge pronto, an' if they fire a signal an' there's others around they'll. . ."

"Shut up," Bradlow said. "Shaeter, go back to the herd an' tell the boys to get it movin'. Morgan, you an' I'll go meet these galoots jus' this side o' the ridge. Mebbe we can get the drop on 'em an' turn 'em back."

He and Morgan rode swiftly to the ridge. They reined back among boulders below the backbone, drawing their guns. They wanted the newcomers to ride into their threatening sixguns and be unable to raise the alarm. A few moments later the three riders topped the rise.

Then Bradlow chuckled. He said, "Waal, what d' you know? One of 'em is Jan Tolson. Will she be surprised to see me!"

There was a kind of vicious satisfaction in him. It seemed to indicate that Jan Tolson, whoever she was, and Lew Bradlow were old enemies, and that Bradlow had a score to settle. It was all news to Keen Morgan. But his main concern was to keep from being hung as a rustler and when Bradlow pranced his roan from the boulders to confront the three riders, Morgan followed.

"Where d'you figure you're goin', folks?" Bradlow said.

The trio reined back abruptly, staring at menacing sixguns. One of the two cowboys muttered a savage oath, but the girl cut in quickly. "Hold it, Red. This man is Lew Bradlow, the outlaw. He'll kill you if you go for your gun."

"Good advice," Bradlow said. "An' this hombre with me is Keen Morgan, who you might've heard of also, an' his gunhand is as plumb nervous as mine. So I kinda suggest that you two saddlebums unbuckle your gunbelts an' let' 'em fall. Then mebbe there won't be any misunderstandings."

The two cowboys slowly obeyed, taking care to keep their hands away from their holsters. The gunbelts thudded to the ground. The girl, meanwhile, had been looking beyond Morgan and Bradlow to where the stolen herd had begun to move north, driven by the other five outlaws.

"So now you're stealing my cattle, Bradlow," she said. She was a slim, proud young woman, dressed in shirt and riding-skirt with a wide sombrero allowing a glimpse of dark-gold hair. She was quite unafraid. Her proud gaze flicked from Bradlow to Morgan and back again.

Bradlow bowed mockingly, holster-

ing his gun. He said, "Matter o' fact, some o' that herd jus' might be yours, Jan. Not that you could prove it, seein' that there ain't a court in the West that'll uphold a claim on unbranded cattle."

"You talk of courts!" the girl flashed. "A lot you care about courts and the law, you animal. All right, take my strays and get out, pronto. But I'm warning you... I'm arranging to have this side of the river patrolled by my cowhands in future, so don't ever come back. It won't be healthy."

SHE TURNED her mount and started away, the cowboys with her. Morgan figured that the talk was finished and he holstered his gun. But Bradlow was far from finished.

"Hold it, Jan," he commanded, and she reined back before she'd properly got going. The two hands reined back also, staring baleful-like at Bradlow. The big man said, "I don't like threats, an' you ain't exactly in a position to make 'em. Once, Jan honey, I made you an offer an' you was plenty rude about turnin' me down. Now I'm makin' it again. Marry me, huh?"

"You fool!" Jan Tolson said. "You conceited fool!"

"All right, then, *don't* marry, me," Bradlow grinned. "I jus' wanted to give you the chance, that's all. Me, I ain't a stickler for the rules o' the game."

The girl stared at him with wide blue eyes and Morgan saw Bradlow's meaning sinking into her. Bradlow himself nodded his head to the two cowhands and said, "Get goin'. Miss Tolson won't be returnin' to the ranch."

The man who'd been called Red burst into a string of flaming cowboy oaths. Then he said, "I'll kill you, Bradlow... I'll kill you...."

"What with?" Bradlow asked. "Your dirty looks? Get goin', you ginger-haired lout, before I bore your eyes out."

The other rider, a gaunt and much older man, said, "We can't do nothin' Red, except get ourselves killed without helpin' Miss Jan one bit. Let's go an' get help."

He dragged at Red's arm and together they turned and began to ride. Bradlow said, savagely, "Help! I never thought o' that. I'll fix 'em." And he slapped a hand to his gun.

"Hold it, Lew," Morgan said.

The words cracked like the lash of a whip. Bradlow froze. At the top of the rise the two cowboys reined back, and turned to watch. Bradlow swung his gaze to Morgan, his hand still touching the butt of his holstered gun. Morgan sat without holding the reins of his mount, but with hands hanging loosely.

"What'd you say?" Bradlow said, not sure of the situation.

Keen Morgan made the situation clear. He said, "You can't shoot down them hombres in cold blood, Lew. Any more 'an you can take Miss Tolson by force."

"Oh?" Bradlow's voice was suddenly soft, wondering. "Why can't I, Morgan? You ain't got any objections, have you?"

"Sure have," Morgan said, and then he knew that this was going to be a showdown, and the fiery devils flashed in his blue eyes. He said, "Woman-snatchin' is somethin' I won't stand for, Lew."

Bradlow swore. He said, "You crazy galoot! This's the second time you've crossed me, damn you! The firs' time it was over a hoss; now it's a woman. You're one hell of a softhearted badman, ain't you?"

"I got my own rules," Morgan said; "I stick to 'em. I stuck to 'em three years ago in Santa Fe, when Toss Riley figured to do the same kinda thing

you're figurin' now. I'm tellin' you, Lew, if you wanta take this gal you'll have to kill me first."

"That don't exactly scare me," Bradlow said. "I got my hand on my gun right now. I've only gotta draw it. You must think you're purty good, Morgan."

"Try me out," Morgan said, and it was a challenge that Bradlow couldn't ignore. His gun came out and up—

Nobody followed the striking speed of Keen Morgan's hand. All they saw was the blast of fire from the gun which had somehow come from its holster to join its chorus with Bradlow's shot. Morgan felt the burn of hot lead along his forearm as a hole opened redly in Bradlow's shirt. Bradlow dropped his gun and hunched forward, coughing. Jan Tolson screamed and cupped her face with her hands. Bradlow fell to the ground and lay still, and with the tired sickness plaguing him Morgan holstered his Colt.

The two cowboys came riding back from the ridge, uncertainly. Morgan turned on them. He said, "Get goin', hombres. Take Miss Tolson with you. Hurry! Purty soon there's gonna be five more enemies makin' it awkward for you if they catch you."

"No...wait!" The girl spoke quickly, recovered from her horror. "What about you? You must come with us. Quickly!"

IT WAS a confused moment, the two cowboys leaving their saddles to scramble for the discarded gunbelts, Morgan looking from the anxious-eyed girl to the herd and back again. His glance at the herd had shown him the five riders turning their mounts to come and investigate the shooting. The girl spoke again, urgently.

"Please...Mr, Morgan...you *must* throw in with us now! Let's go. Or d'you wish to stay here and argue it out with those other rustlers?"

"Let's go," Morgan said.

In a moment all four were riding hard for the ridge-top. They clattered over it and down the other side. Ahead there was a fairly open trail to the distant river that gleamed like silver in the afterglow of sundown.

From the ridgetop behind, shots cracked thinly, but they were shots of useless anger. The range was hopeless for sixguns, and when Morgan turned in his saddle to look back he saw that the chase wasn't being continued. With his new companions he reached the river and crossed it, the horses swimming for a few yards where it was deepest in the middle.

Beyond the river they rode at a flying pace without talking. Morgan guessed that the Square T ranchhouse must be many hours ride away, and wondered whether his new companions figured to ride on through the night. But an hour later, in the deepening dusk, they drew rein at a log cabin that was half hidden among the cottonwoods that lined a ridge.

"This is what we call Cottonwood Camp," Jan Tolson said. "We shall stay the night here. You may sleep with the boys outside, Mr. Morgan, and—"

"Beggin' your pardon," Keen Morgan said, looking at a spiral of smoke from the cabin chimney and at spare horses hitched outside. "Seems like you got quite a crew here, an' anyway I reckon I'll mosey along'"

"Don't be ridiculous!" The girl leaped lightly from her saddle and the cowboy called Red took her horse. She looked at Morgan who was still mounted. She said, "Sure, we have five or six people here, but there's room for another. An' Conchita'll have a good meal ready by now. Won't you stay?"

The two cowboys had gone into the cabin and Morgan heard them telling others of what had happened east of

the river. Morgan was mighty uneasy. He said, "Miss Tolson...I'm one o' the hombres who was rustlin' your cattle. But I ain't anxious to hang; so I reckon I'll hit the breeze before them riders o' yours decide to get rough—"

"My riders will do exactly what I tell them to," the girl said. "You need have no fear. Every second person along the Pecos is a rustler anyway. And I wish to talk to you."

Morgan could see her eyes watching him anxiously in the dusk, and he could think of a lot of things more unpleasant than talking to her. He swung from the saddle and began to strip his mount. The girl rested a warm hand lightly on his arm for a moment, and said, "Thanks...for what you did, back there."

Then she vanished into the cabin.

THE MEAL was worth staying for. It had been expertly prepared by the darkeyed young Conchita, who found time to flirt with the cowboys while serving them. Morgan, too, came in for his share of her attention, and smiled his slit-eyed smile at the sidelong, sleepy glances she gave him. She was quite a girl, that Conochita, and the boys were crazy over her. But they appeared just as crazy over their boss. Jan Tolson, though it was a different kind of worship.

Jan was terse and businesslike with them, directing questions about the day's work and the location of cattle. The boys answered eagerly with the worship in their eyes, yet with a free-and-easy manner that lacked nothing in respect. The girl was twenty, maybe, Morgan thought. Certainly no older.

He began to learn the boys' names. The gaunt man with Red was called Mossy. Then there were Happy, Waldo, Tom, and a laughing green-eyed blond youngster they called Mustang. They were a happy lot, Morgan thought, though each man had the hardness of experience that settles early on riders of the lawless range. They would be a tough outfit. And sometimes, as they looked at him with eyes not exactly friendly, he was glad that he hadn't fallen among them without Jan Tolson's protection.

He knew that his name had quickly been passed around between them, that his part in the rustling was resented, and that inevitably a few of these boys would be cocky enough to want to "try him out."

And at the end of the meal, while the roving-eyed Conchita cleared away the things, Jan Tolson addressed the crew.

"Boys, on the way to the river with Red and Mossy I met up with Jim Copper. He was making for the Bluff, where Jo Sale an' his crew are doing some branding. He tells me a herd of Square T beef was sold to crooked agents in Benbow, late las' month. Branded stuff, mind you. And as you know, we haven't driven any beef to Benbow in three months."

"Where'd Jim get that, Miss Jan?" Waldo asked.

"From Arthur Mornington, of the Snake M. He was jus' back from Benbow. It seems that rustling activities are milking this ranch on a bigger scale than ever."

"It's the only thing we can expect, Miss Jan," Mossy said soberly. "We're runnin' too many head. Jim Copper says you've lost track o' how many. An' it's a cinch that ten cowhands ain't enough to handle 'em all ...not even ten rough hellions the like o' which you see around you."

There was a harsh chorus of laughter.

Jan Tolson said, "You're right, Mossy. Jim Copper's right. I'm doing what my Dad would never have done ...gradually reducing the stock. It can't be done in a day, though. And every time some bunch o' thieves"—her eyes rested on Morgan and flicked away quickly—helps 'emselves

to a herd we're losing money that the Square T can't afford to lose. It must stop."

The reckless-looking cowboy Red was looking at Morgan. He said, "What we need's an example, mebbe. If a few catched rustlers was left hangin' about our range it might plumb discourage—"

"Hold it, Red," Jan said quickly.

The cowboy shrugged and was silent. Jan spoke again. "The trouble with this northern part o' the Pecos is that it's expanded too fast. There're too many cattle here, too many big holders, an' too big a population of ranch people for the puny law to handle. It's become wild territory, wilder than my father ever saw. And it's got so that might is gradually overpowering right, until the open range has almost become a free-for-all scramble. Ranchers inevitably lose unbranded stock and don't hesitate to take somebody else's to make up. There is hardly an outfit, outside of the Square T, that doesn't do a little rustling on the side as a matter of routine. So you see, Red, that if you start hanging rustlers all over the range you're going to start jus' about the biggest range war the West ever saw."

There was an anger-filled murmur among the riders.

"What we've got to do," Jan said, "is get our scattered beef rounded up in just two or three places and keep a guard in each herd. For that we'll need more men, I know. I'll see what can be done to get them. Jim Copper agrees that it's the solution to our problem. Then all we'll have to do is fight anybody who comes looking for trouble. Only...nobody will."

"Mebbe they won't," young Mustang said, "an' mebbe they will. They been used to sneakin' across far parts of our range an' collectin' beef as they go. On the quiet, like. But I reckon when they find they can't do that any more, they'll raid the main herds, guard or no guard. D'you realise who's been doin' most o' the rustlin', Miss Jan? It's Hank Jadehorn, o' the Diamond J. That homebre'll stop at nothin'. We'll sure need men!"

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NO MATTER how they discussed the problem, it always came back to that one main point. The Square T needed men, and apparently men were not easy to get along this part of the Pecos. And several times he saw the cool speculation in Jan's young face as she looked at him, and he marvelled.

She put it into words right after the meeting when she got him alone. She said, "Forty a month an' plenty o' good grub, mister. With that gunhand o' yours, we sure could use you. What d'you say?"

Morgan smiled, the flame of blue bright in his lazy eyes. He said, "Look, little gal, I'm Keen Morgan. You've heard o' me, sure. I've done a lotta things that ain't accordin' to the book. You caught me rustlin' your beef... an' now you're wantin' me to ride for you."

She shrugged and said, "Sure, Mr Morgan, I've heard of you. But this is a wild territory and hard, wild men are the only kind that survive it. Some of my other boys were outlaws. Waldo, for instance, and Happy. And that smiling devil Mustang was well on the way to being a gunman before I signed him up. Don't you see, it's really tough men I've got to have riding for me. The other kind aren't worth their pay in this country."

Morgan scratched his nose. He said, "Shucks, I never looked at it thataway. But I guess you're right, at that. Only...how can you trust me, Miss

Jan? I might kinda take advantage o' my job to rustle more o' your beef. I might cut in with this Hank Jadehorn fella, on the quiet. What 'bout that?"

He wasn't expecting the kind of answer she gave. It wasn't a spoken answer. Not for awhile, anyway. It was a widening of her eyes that revealed the soft depths in them, it was a toss of her head that made the lamplight play on the twinkling gold of her hair. It was a little smile about her lips, and a backward move of her body that was a poem of motion under the shirt and skirt of her.

She spoke then. "My boys are all loyal. They all...love me. Or didn't you notice? I'm not afraid that you'll doublecross me, Keen Morgan."

Later, Jan Tolson and Conchita slept in the cabin while the seven men bunked down under the stars. It was a long time before sleep came to Morgan. He kept looking up at the bright stars and smiling in his brain.

"Blast the girl! She's that sure o' herself, huh? Jus' for that, I'll stay an' ride for her. An' by hell...if she ever looks at me that away again...I'll sure show her I ain't one of her dumbstruck cowboys..." He muttered the words in his mind, while in his heart there pulsed the kind of excitement for which he lived. the excitement of anticipating a new experience.

Next day he got to meet Jim Copper who, he found out, was the Square T foreman. He was a grizzled oldtimer with honest grey eyes above which bushy eyebrows were raised in a kind of perpetual surprise. Later, Morgan learned that the boys had a joke about those eyebrows, saying that they'd been that way ever since old Jay Tolson died and his daughter began giving the orders.

Copper was dubious about Morgan until she told him, frankly, and to Morgan's embarrassment, of the way she'd been saved from the brutish Lew Bradlow. Then the foreman seemed to take to Morgan. He said, "Miss Jan's right 'bout one thing, anyway. We need men an' we need 'em tough. Let's start workin', huh?"

The cowboys of the Square T were slower to take to him, and it wasn't wholly on account of his reputation as a wild gunman. Red was civil enough, but didn't speak unless spoken to. Young Mustang was openly hostile. The others were indifferent.

Keen Morgan was a lone wolf and not much perturbed by his unpopularity, though it puzzled him. Sure, he'd been caught rustling Square T beef; but according to the talk, rustling was just about the commonest thing around here, almost the normal way of life. And you'd have thought that his killing of the evil-planning Bradlow would have squared things with the boys if they loved Jan Tolson so much.

And then he found that that was exactly the trouble. They loved Jan too much...and they loved Conchita too much. Two girls, each remarkably pretty in her own style, and ten woman-hungry cowboys. All they could see in Keen Morgan was another rival.

IT WAS young Mustang who spilled it. He was herding cows with Morgan a mile from Cottonwood Camp, and he said, chewing, and squinting his eyes to the distance, "You must find this steer-nursin' life kinda dull, huh? It's a wonder you don't pull your freight."

"You don't look like you're in a hurry to pull yours," Morgan grinned. "It ain't no duller for me than it is for you."

Mustang scowled and then turned to bore his gaze at Morgan. He said, "All right...you got us all wonderin'. He an' the boys, I mean. Out with it, Morgan...which one is it?"

"What're you talkin' about?" Morgan asked.

"Aw...you know damn' well! D'you think we figure you're workin' on this

spread because you like it? You, Keen Morgan, who never worked for forty a month in his life? You who they reckon Billy-the-Kid ain't game to face? It's gotta be because of one o' the gals. an' we know it. Only...which one is it?"

"Waal, now, which one d'you figure it would be?" Morgan asked, his smiling half-shut eyes only making Mustang angrier.

"Damn you, how would I know? Fellas have different tastes. Me, I'm for Miss Jan; she's a thoroughbred gal, or I never seen one. An' there ain't nothin' stuck-up about her jus' because she's our boss. You oughta see her, dancin' with the boys when we have a shivoo at the ranch-house. Even with ol' Mossy. An' the way I figure, she'll have to get married some day, won't she? All gals do."

"Most all," Morgan agreed. Then, "An so you're wonderin' whether I'm gonna step on *your* toes, huh, Mustang?"

"Hell, all I want is your cards on the table," the youngster said. "I'm kinda used to hombres steppin' on my toes. H a p p y, Tom, Jo Sale. . .they're all makin' plays for Miss Jan. But at least I know how I stand with 'em."

"Only four o' you fixin' to be her husband?" Morgan said.

"Far's I know, sure. The others are after Conchita...except Jim Copper an' Mossy who're kinda old an' not interested any more." He looked at Morgan with a new eagerness. "Say, there's a gal, that Conchita! You ever see such a saucy little dark-eyed devil? An' you bein' a outlaw an' all...mebbe you'd like a hard-to-tame little fiery Mex, huh?"

Morgan laughed. He said, "They ain't so hard to tame. Once down in El Nido I knowed a Mex gal. She used to flirt with me jus' to annoy a Mex friend o' mine who loved her. But one day he whipped her up across his saddle, kickin' an' screamin' like a wildcat, and carted her off to the mountain for a week. When he brought her back she was eatin' outa his hand. Even tried to stab another gal who smiled at my friend. Nope...them fiery ones ain't so hard to tame if you handle 'em right."

"That so?" Mustang said, staring. "Hell, I must tell Red. He's jus' plumb loco over Conchita, but she runs him around somethin' cruel. But look, Morgan..." He scowled again. "You ain't put your cards on the table yet. Which o' the gals has got you hawgtied on this spread—"

"Hold it," Morgan snapped, suddenly standing in the stirrups. His gaze was squinted to the distance westward, where a dust haze told its tale of moving cattle. Mustang followed the directin and frowned. M o r g a n said, "They're movin' north. Which means that it ain't Square T hands drivin' 'em."

"You're right," Mustang said at once. "Jim Copper ordered that all the stock between Cottonwood Camp an' the Bluff was to be herded in Four Mile Coulee, south o' here. Them steers is sure movin' the wrong way, Morgan."

"Let's go," Morgan said.

He kicked his mount to action, and soon it was settled into the long-striding pace which had got Morgan out of trouble plenty of times, but which now carried him headlong into it.

It was open range with only occasional boulders or sage, and the distance flew underhoof. Morgan had guessed the dust haze to be maybe four miles away. After a minute of hard riding he turned in the saddle and was surprised to see Mustang, on his lean buckskin, still close behind. Morgan had encountered few horses that could keep pace with his shiny black bronc.

They raced across a shallow hollow and lost sight of the quarry for two minutes. But when at last they topped the lip of the bordering rise the dust

haze was close. Another couple of miles, he figured. He crossed a wide flat and crashed through a clump of sage from which unbranded poddies scattered, their thin legs dancing. He swung in a circle to avoid a rocky upgrade and then he turned right along a pass between ridges. And Mustang was still on his tail.

They crashed out of the pass to see the jogging steers half a mile to the left. Four hombres driving the mob were scattered in a wide half-circle behind, eating the dust thrown up by two hundred hoofs, and oblivious of the two riders approaching their rear.

MORGAN smiled. The setup was perfect as far as he and Mustang were concerned. Those rustlers were half-blinded by dust and deafened by the drum of running hoofs. They would never know what hit them.

Morgan had a moment of stirring conscience. He thought: *Less than a week ago I was a rustler myself. But it's the luck o' the game, I guess. I got nothin' against these guys. But I'm gonna be loyal to Jan.*

They rode hard into the first dust and then one of the hombres turned and saw them. Morgan saw the man's gun flash to action and heard his harsh yell above the thud of hoofs. Morgan's own Colt came out and he plugged the man almost point-blank as his bronc swerved in to cross the enemy's path.

Shots crashed and men yelled curses, and in the riot of sound the herd stampeded away. Morgan was prancing his mount and looking for further enemies. A slug burned his saddlehorn and he swung his gun to blast a man to earth. The man rolled about in the dust, sobbing with pain.

Then the shots were finished. Morgan held his smoking Colt at the ready and saw a third body sprawled away to the left. A fourth rustler rode hard away to the south, no stomach for the fight. Morgan was about to chase him when he found Mustang in the dust. The wild youngster was standing over his fallen buckskin and had holstered his gun. He was swearing and sobbing, together. His horse was dead, a bullet in the brain.

"Bucky! They killed Bucky! He was the bes' damn' hoss..." The boy pointed a trembling hand the way the last of the rustlers had gone. "It was Kesting, done it. Roy Kesting, Jadehorn's foreman."

"I'll go after the coyote—" Morgan began.

"No you won't Morgan!" Mustang turned his hurt grey eyes to him and Morgan was shocked at what he saw in them. "I'll 'tend to my own fights, Morgan. I'll meet Kesting an' call him. I'll kill him. He shot my hoss, damn him, an' it was deliberate. He knowed how...how..."

"Sure, sure, Kid, it's your fight," Morgan said at once. Grabbing the reins of a nearby riderless cayuse he said, "Get aboard. We gotta run after them steers, turn 'em back before they run plumb into Mexico. Let's go."

With a quick look at the three men on the ground they left them for dead and rode in the wake of the faraway dustcloud. Reaching the herd, watching for a chance to turn them, and getting them pointed toward Four Mile Coulee took the rest of the day. When at last the two punchers camped from carried rations at sundown, the still-troubled Mustang said, "How d'you figure a hombre like that? We was point-blank, see, Kesting an' me. He could've shot me, on account of he came out of a swirl o' dust while I was shootin' at another rustler. All right, he could've shot me. But no, he'd sooner rip a fella's heart the other way. He shot Bucky."

There was a reckless, blazing madness in Mustang. Morgan had a glimpse of himself as he was maybe five years ago. But it seemed longer

than that. Suddenly it seemed a lifetime.

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IT TOOK a week more to get the greater part of the Square T cattle herded into two main bunches. Then, with three new riders that Jim Copper had been able to hire, a roster system was arranged so that half the riding strength of the outfit was always on duty, night and day. It was then that Keen Morgan got to see the ranch-house for the first time.

It was a sprawling place of logs and stone, situated among tall pines seven miles west of the Pecos River. There were neat corrals and outbuildings, and a cobbled patio in front of the house. In all, it looked a prosperous concern, but Morgan soon came to know that the Tolson girl was having a hard struggle against expenses and loss.

At the ranch-house, also, Morgan got a better idea of how the two girls were so sought after. There was a bunch of riders madly in love with the capable owner of the Square T, another bunch who vied for the attentions of the flirtatious Conchita, and a few desperate souls who alternated between one and the other. Morgan thought that it was a strange situation, not sure that he liked it. "Of course," he told himself, "that little Mexican cook is a natural heart-breaker and you can't blame the boys for running after her. But heck. . .I ain't so keen on the way they throw 'emselves at Jan. After all, she's the owner o' this spread. It jus' ain't dignified."

And then he knew that it was a phoney reason, that he was only making excuses to himself as to why the others should leave her alone. He smiled at himself.

It was a new experience for him to feel as he did about her. And it was an experience he didn't buck away from. There'd always been girls, no matter where he'd been, but before he'd always taken them or left them alone without undue concern. Now, as the days went by, he knew that he'd met a girl he just couldn't leave alone. He had joined the Jan-lovers in no uncertain manner. Soon it became obvious to everyone that he sought every opportunity to be near her. It brought grunts of satisfaction from the Conchita team and black looks from the others. But at least his cards were on the table now, and bunkhouse conjecture was at an end. Some of the boys were seen to pay out bets on the result.

But the blackest looks, it seemed to Morgan, came from young Mustang. That blond cowboy, two years Jan's junior, was wild about her, and very serious, and less inclined to swear in savage but harmless exasperation at this evidence of yet another rival. Or it might have been that some of the blackness of his looks came from the hatred of the Diamond J foreman, Roy Kesting. Mustang hadn't foresworn vengeance for the loss of his horse. At first, he'd been crazy-wild to ride in among those neighboring rustlers with spitting sixgun. They'd have killed him sure.

After that, Mustang had contented himself with making rides into nearby Valley End, hoping to meet in the common ground of a saloon the enemy who was known to visit the town often.

But so far he'd had no luck, since the Square T boys had but one night off each week, and none of his visits had coincided with Kesting's. Mustang, seething with impatience, had to content himself with day-long practice at drawing and shooting, dreaming of the

time when he would at last have Kesting in his sights. And the boy wasn't half bad with a gun, Morgan thought. Morgan had seen faster gunslingers, but the boy was faster than average.

IT WAS THIS state of affairs, together with occasional brushes with rustlers who tried to sneak in among the big herds, that ruled when the announcement of a coming "shivoo" at the Square T brought grins of anticipation from the riders.

The occasion would be Conchita's birthday, a fact which set the Conchita admirers arguing fiercely whether she would be eighteen or nineteen. Conchita knew the value of such conjecture and made no statement one way or the other.

Next there followed a great shuffling of shifts as riders angled to be off-duty on the great date. The guarding of the herds still had to go on, Jim Copper held, and Jan's promise that special party fare would be sent to the patrolling riders didn't bring a lot of enthusiasm. A party on horseback out at Four Mile Coulee just wasn't the same as a party in the ranch-house with dancing and music and chances to flirt. That other girls from neighboring ranches would be there, as a kind of consolation to those who missed out on Jan or Conchita, made the boys less eager for work than ever. In the end they drew lots, and even then some of the keener losers were heard to swap time for hard cash.

Morgan drew lucky. So did Red, Waldo, Tom, two brothers named Henterline, and a tall and drawling cowboy known only by the name of Georgia. And Mustang.

The blond young cowboy wasn't as happy about it as he might have been, partly because Morgan had drawn lucky also, partly because he still carried the burden of his sworn meeting with Kesting in his mind and wasn't very happy about anything.

The party went off with a bang. There was color and pace and laughter to the background of music and good things to eat. The cowboys were slick and scrubbed clean and for once had left their gunbelts in the bunkhouse. Mustang took the first dance with Jan.

He'd have taken the second also if Morgan hadn't smilingly cut in. Mustang scowled and the girl turned to Morgan and he floated her away. She smiled at him and said, "My...you dance well. Are you having a good time, Keen?"

"Right now," Morgan said, "I'm havin' the plumb swellest time o' my life. But I guess it won't last long. These dance tunes never do."

His blue eyes were half-shut with the gay fire of them belying their laziness. Jan studied him for a moment and said, "How'd you manage to get your reputation, Keen? I think you're a four-flusher. You don't look or act like the Keen Morgan I've heard so much about."

Morgan shrugged, still smiling.

"I ain't so bad," he told her. "An' I'm gettin' better every day, now. I ain't rustled a head o' your beef on the sly yet."

"That's nice," she said, matching his banter, and widening her eyes so that he badly wanted to dance her out of the room and wrap her tight in his arms and kiss her. She said, "But I still can't imagine how you got your reputation."

He saw that she was really interested. So he told her.

"I was a wild boy. Like Mustang. One night in a Santa Fe saloon a bullyin' hombre rubbed me the wrong way an' we went for our guns an' I killed him. Jus' like that. A flare o' temper an' it was done. But then it turned out that the hombre was a notorious gunslinger called Killer Magee, with fifteen notches on his gunbutt. So I was kinda famous overnight.

"Waal, I guess I was kinda young to be famous. Mebbe it kinda went to my head. I found that I was jus' nat'rally fast with a gun. An' after that I guess one thing jus' led to another."

She was still smiling up at him, a little wistfully now. She said, "I guess the West breeds wild men. It's natural. So long as you. . .so long as—"

He read in her eyes what she was trying to say. He said, "I've killed five hombres, but they all had their guns out. I've done a little rustlin' and once I helped rob a stage. That's about all. But you likely heard a lot more 'an that. A gunslinger's reputation is plumb liable to grow faster than he can make it."

After he'd given her up to Waldo he got to thinking that she must be partly interested in him, at least, to question him so.

And he found himself remembering Mustang's words. "I figure she'll have to get married sooner or later." And he found himself echoing Mustang's wish for himself, that he might win her.

HE STOOD near the door, smoking, watching Jan as she flirted and danced with Waldo. And it seemed to Morgan that she was maybe turning it on a little too strong. He had a wild hope that it might be for his benefit.

He saw Conchita flashing her dark eyes at him over the shoulder of stumpy Cal Henterline. With a smile he threw away his cigaret and tapped the little cowboy on the shoulder.

"You can't keep Conchita all to yourself, fella. Move over."

Henterline waddled away and Conchita melted into Morgan's arms. She looked up at him with dark, fiery eyes that smiled from deep inside her. She said, "So? The senor is not the so cold hombre after all, no?"

"Did you figure I was?" Morgan asked.

"Si. Poor little Conchita she give up hope for the senor to notice her. All the time she smile an' look pretty an' the senor he do nothing." She pouted prettily.

Morgan said, "I smiled at you lots of times, Conchita. But you always seem so plumb busy with Red—"

"Red!" She tossed her raven, silky hair. "He is the other cold hombre. All the time he say he love me. . .but he do nothing. Nothing!" She pouted and tried to nestle her head against Morgan's chest.

"Waal," Morgan said, "Here he comes, and he sure looks like he's gonna do somethin' this time."

The Mexican girl jerked her head away from Morgan's chest rather too suddenly for one who wasn't interested in Red. The flaming-haired cowboy scowled at Morgan, who passed Conchita over and flashed his smile and walked away. A moment later the music stopped, and he saw Red walk Conchita out to the patio. He went to Jan, found her surrounded by eager cowboys who showed no inclination to let him through, but beat them by getting her a drink and being hailed with delight by her when she saw it poised high above their heads.

The riders fell apart to admit him, muttering under their breath. But it was Mustang who claimed a dance at the first note of music, and Morgan had to let him make a round of the floor before cutting in.

Mustang gave him a murderous look. And meant it. Morgan felt once more a foreboding he had earlier, that trouble with Mustang might be very hard to avoid in the long run.

Morgan had danced Jan halfway round the room and wasn't looking forward to losing her to one of the bunch of hombres who waited. But at the big door that opened to the patio, Jan said, "Oh, dear, I'm hot. D'you mind?"

Did he mind! With a grin he walked her out to the patio. They found a bench under a rose-covered wall. She

sighed. She said, "It's lovely out here."

"Sure is," Morgan said. "An' you're lovely, Jan. My...but them city clothes suit you like they suit few Western gals."

"Why, thank you, Keen," she said brightly. And her wide eyes met his gaze in the starlight.

It was a wonderful moment that seemed to invite him to say the things he wanted to say. He began to say them when there was a click of high heels and Conchita swept past, big Red clumsily following her tiny, proud figure.

"Aw...Conchita...don't be thataway—" Red was saying. But the girl broke into a run and escaped his pleading hands, passing ahead of him into the house. Jan laughed softly. She said, "Poor Red! That Conchita leads him a terrible dance, the little devil. Yet. . . d'you want to know something? She loves him."

"How d'you know?" Morgan asked.

"I just know, that's all. I'm a woman, aren't I? The trouble is, Conchita is hot-blooded and...sort of romantic. And Red is kind of crude."

"What does she want?" Morgan asked. "A long-haired actor spoutin' poetry at her?"

"Why not?" Jan laughed her low, vibrant laugh. "Down in Mexico they do spout poetry, as you call it. To music under the loved one's window. Serenading is a charming custom, don't you agree?"

"Hell, no," Morgan said. And he laughed. "As for Conchita, I figure you've got her wrong. It ain't serenadin' she needs."

"I think it is," Jan said. "And why not? I'd like it myself!"

"You would?" Morgan stared at her. And he flicked his fingers. "Shucks... I'll have to start savin' my pay. To buy a gittar—"

Then suddenly he was leaping to his feet and saying, "What's that! Jan... did you hear it?"

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SHE WAS on her feet beside him, listening. She said, "I heard it. There it is again. Gunfire. Oh, Keen...it's out Four Mile Coulee way. Trouble."

Red had come to the door of the house and was looking out. He called, "What's goin' on? Did I hear—"

"Trouble at the Coulee," Morgan cried. "Get the boys, Red. Let's ride!"

Morgan left Jan and ran to the bunkhouse. He found his gunbelt in the dark, buckled it on and was running for the corral when the rest of the boys came sprinting from the party. Morgan found his black bronc and threw on saddle and bridle. He was riding out of the corral while the others were still cursing and wrestling with cinch-straps in the dark.

He headed northeast across the range. The Coulee was four miles away. The gunfire still sounded, and there was a lowing of disturbed cattle. Jim Copper was riding nightherd at Four Mile, with Joe Sale and two other boys. Morgan guessed that in a raid they would be hopelessly outnumbered. He swore savagely, kicking his mount to the limit, taking risks with speed that shouldn't have been attempted in darkness.

But the bronc ran willingly enough, fresh and game. It wasn't every horse that could be made to stretch out at full pace in the dark. Once there was a stumble that almost unseated Morgan. But he regained control and still kicked for speed, the gunfire ahead still calling him.

It was a ten-minute journey, but it seemed like an hour. The gun-flashes came to view then on the near side of the coulee where the rim loomed against the starlit sky Morgan saw the flash-

es at four different points and knew that there were hombres spread along the rim of the coulee and shooting into it.

They would be the enemy. He was certain of that. Jim Copper and his boys would have been herd-riding in the coulee itself. Raiders would shoot at them from the rim.

EVEN AS Morgan climbed his sweating bronc up the last slopes of the rim, he felt vaguely that there was something queer about all this. Something somehow not quite right. Those hombres had been shooting for a good ten minutes, on and off, and they were still on the rim.

But there was no time to think of it further, and the scrabble of his horse's hoofs drew the attention of the nearest gunman as Morgan drew his Colt. There was a flashing crack of a sixgun and lead fanned his body. He threw an answering shot at where the flash had broken the gloom of boulders, and he heard a man swear, and then other flashes from further away sent bullets whining overhead.

Now there was a fresh outbreak of firing from the floor of the coulee, the shots echoing in the night. And the nearest gunman who had shot at Morgan from the boulders now came clattering on horseback out of them. Morgan saw the shape come out of the gloom and heard a thick voice.

"Take eet, gringo!" Then the horseman was passing close to him and a gun crashed at point-blank range.

Only the plunging movements of his bronc in the dark saved Morgan. He felt the vicious burn of lead at his cheek, and when he tried to shoot the fast-riding gunman another movement of his bronc threw his aim wide. Then the gunman had vanished in the night, and Morgan saw now that there'd been a general exit of the raiders. Gun-flashes split the night at a fast pace northward along the rim of the coulee, moving away fast. Then other shots twisted Morgan in his saddle and he saw the gunfire of Red and the other boys from the house. They had arrived, and the arrival had caused the raiders to run.

Two Square T bullets sang about Morgan's head before he could yell. "Hold it, fellas; this's Morgan. The raiders have run, north."

The group came up in a clatter of noise and dust and the voice of Red cried, "All right...let's go after 'em!"

"Not all of us," Morgan yelled. "We gotta see to Jim Copper's crew. Some of 'em might be hurt."

The riders quickly split into two groups, one moving north to chase the enemy. Morgan and Mustang and Georgia loped down into the coulee, hailing their friends.

Jim Copper's voice floated from not too far away. "Thisaway, cowboys. In the sage clump. Jo's hurt...bad. I reckon."

THEY FOUND the sage clump and the riderless horses standing about. They found three men stooped concernedly over a fourth. As they swung from their saddles, Morgan saw the foreman's face, whitish under the stars. And heard him speak.

"Jo Sale got a bullet where it matters most, fellas. He's dead, all right."

Mustang swore. He said. "Hell... who was they?"

One of the two boys with Copper said, "I seen a white hoss that was plumb like the cayuse Roy Kesting rides."

"Kesting!" Mustang snarled. "Oh, hell...that Kesting!"

"Ain't no use jumpin' to conclusions," Jim Copper said. "There's more an' one white hoss in the valley."

"There was a Mex among 'em" Morgan said, "if that helps." He called me 'gringo' as he passed."

"It sure does help," Mustang said. "Pasquale; he's Kesting's pard. That's good enough for me. It was the Diamond J crew, as usual. I'm for the

lot of us ridin' bang over there an' shootin' up the place once an' for all. We should've done it long ago."

"Wait, Mustang," Copper said. "They might want us to do that. It might be a trap."

"Hell, Jim...what makes you think that?"

"Because there was s o m e t h i n' damned queer about that raid," Copper replied. "They jus' rode to the rim, about five of 'em, I'd say, an' they got us spotted in the dark an' started shootin'. The herd moved to the far side o' the coulee an' we dived into the sage an' shot back at 'em. Waal, we was shootin' at shadows for a damned long time, till you fellas got here. But them raiders made no attempt to get at us. They didn't touch the herd. All they did was keep shootin'. I tell you, I don't savvy it."

It was the same realization that had come to Morgan earlier, and he didn't savvy it either. He began to say, "You might be right, Jim. It might be some kinda trap—"

He was interrupted by a new clatter of hoofs as a bunch of riders came down off the coulee rim. Morgan went for his gun and saw his friends doing the same, but then Red's voice sounded. "It's T riders; don't shoot. We lost that bunch o' coyotes."

In a moment they were with Jim Copper and learning of Jo Sale's death. There was much soft swearing and muttered vengeance. Red said, "They went north...that's the funny thing. Not back toward the Diamond J. North, mind you...almost as if they was headed for town."

"Say...." Red said slowly. "I wonder if they did go to town! We...we could reach Valley End in an hour."

"Wait," the cautious Jim Copper said. "It might still be a trap—"

"Trap nothin'!" Mustang cried. "How the hell can we be trapped in a townful o' citizens? Let's go."

"No," Copper said, deeply worried. "We've lost one good man tonight. Let's not go headin' for further loss. Miss Jan needs every danged one of us."

"It's Jan I'm thinkin of," Mustang cried, "An' Jo Sale. An' my dead Bucky. You can't make me take any more, Jim! Anyway, tonight I'm off duty an' if I wanta go into Valley End I'll go."

"I'll go with you," Red said, turning to his horse. "Me, I ain't gonna stand around' till somebody bores me an' it's too late to fight."

The two cowbys rode away, out of the coulee and northward. The others returned to the dead Jo Sale, helping get him roped across a saddle for his last ride. Then they all mounted, but Keen Morgan drew away from the rest.

"Jim," he said, "I reckon I'll mosey along into town. I didn't wanta ruffle them two boys by sayin' so in front of 'em, but they're both kinda hotheaded an' might need an experienced gunhand to back 'em up."

"Hell's bells!" the foreman cried. "You too? The way things are goin' Miss Jan ain't gonna have any riders at all...."

Morgan laughed and pulled away in the night. He had never been to Valley End, but the very name of the place suggested its location and he rode north in the tracks of Red and Mustang. The ground made a gradual rise until, half an hour later, he found himself on a ridge from where the lights of the town were plainly visible.

IT WAS a small town, hardly worthy of being called one, a rough collection of stores built around the two main buildings which were saloons. There was just one wide street a hundred yards long, with a rough rail fence making a corral at one end. But Morgan found a hitching rail outside the first saloon and left his bronc there.

There was loud talk in the saloon, but not the kind of murmuring chorus that was common to saloons. This was

individual talk, from one or two angry voices loud in the hush of other men. Morgan stepped across to a window and looked in.

He saw Red in there, at the bar. Mustang was nowhere in sight. And Red was arguing with a broken-nosed hombre who towered over him in height and was miles ahead in calm.

Red was standing alertly on wide apart feet, facing the other guy who leaned his elbows easily in relaxation on the bar Red was saying. "It won't do you no good to lie 'bout it. Jadehorn. Your boys did it all right."

So that was Jadehorn, the owner of the Diamond J. Morgan thought. He'd heard a lot about him, none of it good. He heard Jadehorn say, "Like I done tol' you, me an' a bunch o' my riders has been in town since sundown an' we ain't moved. Ask anyone. Ask May, here She'll tell you. Hey, May honey, come here..."

May was a pretty but slightly faded saloon girl who'd been hovering nearby. She came forward, swaying her hips and making the most of the moments while all eyes were on her.

"Tell this jasper where I been all night, May," Jadehorn said.

"Hank's been right here in this saloon." the girl said to Red. "Earlier some o' his J riders was with him, but they're over at the *Silver Ace* now. Ain't none of 'em been outa town tonight."

"Look, sweetheart," Red said, "I ain't interested in whether this rustlin' rancher has been here all night or all year. But you sure can't speak for hombres like Kesting an' that damn greaser Pasquale."

"They ain't been in town at all, that I know of," May said.

"No? Then here's news for you, sweetheart. Pasquale's bay mare an' Kesting's big white hoss are in the town corral. I seen 'em. Kesting and Pasquale are here now if they wasn't before. They came straight to town after raidin' Four Mile Coulee an' killin' Jo Sale. An' Hank Jadehorn knows it."

"I know nothin'," Jadehorn snarled. "A thing don't have to be so, because you say it. If Kesting an' Pasquale are here, all right, they're here. They got a right to come to town if they want. What the hell're you tryin' to prove anyway?"

"That you're a rustlin' polecat," Red said, his fingers hooked tensely as they hovered above his gun. "That you're the head stinker in a nest of rustlin polecats. An' that the job you put your boys to tonight, killed Jo Sale. I'm gonna even up for Jo."

Jadehorn shrugged. He made no move to face Red, no move toward his gun. He picked up a glass of whisky and sipped calmly. Red lost what little patience he had left. He stepped forward and slapped the glass from Jadehorn's hand, whisky splashing along the bar and glass splintering.

"Mebbe you don't hear so good," Red sneered. "I called you, Jadehorn."

Jadehorn made an impatient gesture. In the deathly stillness of the saloon his voice was low and smooth. It said, "You're a damn' fool, Red. If we fight one of us is gonna be killed. It jus' might be you. An' you say that Jan Tolson's lost one good rider already tonight."

"Hell of a lot you care for that," Red fumed.

"You'd be surprised." Jadehorn smiled, and it seemed to curl his broken nose across his lean face. "I admire that gal; she's plenty game."

Red stared at him. He said, "What're you tryin' to pull now? If you admire Jan why d'you steal her cattle?"

Jadehorn appeared to weigh that question carefully. Then he said, "I ain't admittin' I steal her cattle, an' I ain't admittin' anythin' else. Now will you get the hell outa here an' leave me in peace?"

"No!" Red roared. "I'm gonna kill you. An' if you won't draw you can die the other way, like a dawg!"

RED'S HAND slapped at his gunbutt and it was too late for Morgan, at the window, to do anything but look. He saw Jadehorn flash into action too—but not gun action. Jadehorn's long leg snapped out viciously and kicked Red's gun out of his hand. The gun clattered across the floor. But Jadehorn made no move to draw his own. All he did was slam a long right to Red's jaw, stepping into the blow lithely, and sending Red crashing and bouncing and skidding across the floor.

Red came to a stop against upset poker tables. There was blood staining his lips and his face was white. He looked surprised and raging, together. He scrambled up and ran at Jadehorn, but his run was weak and groggy, and Morgan had seen enough. He left the window in a hurry.

When he burst in at the door he saw Red reeling back under a walking, two-fisted barrage from the long Jadehorn. The saloon girl May had shrunk back along the bar, the violence frightening her. Morgan reached Jadehorn just as Red went down for the second time. He put a hand on the Diamond J man's shoulder, swung him hard, and sent him crashing with a neat clip to the jaw.

Now the watchers in the saloon muttered excitedly, wondering what the hell they could expect next. Red was down there on the floor, struggling, his will to get up stronger than his ability. Hank Jadehorn was down there and pushing himself to a sitting position and staring at Keen Morgan.

"Who the hell're you?" he managed to ask at last.

"Morgan, o' the Square T. I figured my pard had took enough punishment, seein' the difference in weight an' reach. If you wanta fight, do it the equal way, huh? Red called you, anyway."

"Equal way?" Jadehorn got up slowly. "What's equal about it? I'd have killed the damn' fool!"

Those words puzzled Morgan. He couldn't tell whether they were uttered in honesty or as a vain boast to cover his refusal to draw. Morgan said, "I hit you, Jadehorn. D'you want me?"

"I don't want any part o' you!" Jadehorn cried. "Take your damn' fool hothead of a pard an' get the hell out. Blast it, all I ever wanted to do in this place is drink whisky!"

Morgan watched the rancher dusting himself down, waiting for a trick draw or something. But there was no trickery. Morgan went to where bystanders had helped Red up. Red was demanding his gun, but somebody had got down on it and refused to give it up. Morgan took Red's arm and marched him from the saloon.

The night air revived Red. He said, "My Gawd. . . how's a man gonna kill a dirty damn' rustler who won't draw! The yellow polecat!"

"Mebbe he is," Morgan said; "mebbe not. Sometimes it takes more courage to refuse a challange than to fight. Where'd Mustang go?"

"Lookin' for Kesting," Red said. "We saw Kesting's hoss in the corral, see. We looked for him. We got to this place an' I saw Jadehorn in there an' figured to make somebody pay for Jo Sale's death. But Mustang left me to it, sayin' he wanted Kesting more urgent than he wanted anyone."

"Let's find him," Morgan said.

They walked. Morgan felt Red's gaze on him and knew the cowboy was wondering at his presence in town. But he didn't voice the question. They came to the *Silver Ace*, more crowded than the last place, and they found Mustang in there. He was drinking.

"Hi," Morgan said. Mustang stared at him stonily. Red said, "Hope you're havin' better luck than I did. Are you?"

Mustang shrugged. He said, "Ain't caught up with Kesting yet. Now I'm

waitin' for him to catch up with me. A saloon gal tol' me he always drinks here when he's in town."

"Look, it's kinda late," Morgan said. "It's after midnight. I guess Kesting won't be comin' in now. You plumb better—"

"You guessed wrong, Morgan," the kid said, looking beyond Keen. "He's here; get outa my way."

Morgan saw the deadly purpose in Mustang's grey eyes and he stepped away. He went along the bar aways with Red. Behind him, he heard Mustang's voice, unbelievably casual. It said, "Hi, Roy."

MORGAN stopped and looked round and saw Roy Kesting, short and thickset, stop at the bar five paces from Mustang and stare at him. The tension between the Diamond J foreman and that slip of a boy spread like wildfire and men fell back, watching with wide eyes.

"Been waitin' for you," Mustang said, his words ringing to the four corners of the saloon. "Figured you'd be in for a drink after your work at Four Mile."

"I dunno what you're talkin' bout," Kesting said, his beady eyes alert for danger. "I ain't been near Four Mile."

"Liar," the kid said pleasantly, "You was there at Jo Sale's killin'. Like you was there at the shootin' o' my hoss a few days back. Seems to me you're a damn' nuisance, Kesting. I'm gonna kill you."

Kesting managed a slow sneer. He said, "Back down before you go too far, sonny. What're you tryin' to do... show off in front o' your Square T friends?" He snapped a contemptuous glance at Red and Morgan.

"How far have I gotta go?" Mustang asked. "I already called you a liar. Or are you so used to bein' called that that it don't insult you any more?"

"Blast your fool heart!" Kesting cried and his hand slapped gunward. Then it was action that moved like lightning, both men bringing guns forward and up and blasting in one roar.

But Mustang's first shot was a telling one, for while Kesting only got to throw one bullet, Mustang kept throwing them. Four times he fired, his spitting barrel following the slowly crumpling body of Kesting to the floor.

Quickly Red and Morgan stepped forward, alert and watchful, one each side of Mustang. There were other Diamond J riders in town. They scanned the faces in the saloon but nobody moved. And Red said, "Let's get outa here. We got some ridin' to do."

They left the *Silver Ace* without interference. Their horses were scattered all over town and they separated to collect them. Morgan got his and was loping south along the main street when a J rider shot at him from a saloon window.

The bullet flipped the rim of his hat. Morgan drew and snapped a shot that smashed glass above the hombre's head. At the end of town he joined up with Red and Mustang and they hit the breeze. For a long time they rode hard, and then they hauled back for a moment to listen but could hear no sounds of pursuit.

They went forward again, heading for the Square T in the blackness of the early morning hours. And Red said, "That's one enemy less for Miss Jan, anyway. Kesting. I sure wish I could've made it two, but that Jadehorn hombre jus' wouldn't draw!"

Morgan said to Mustang, "Say... that was purty fast movin', Mustang. But you was a little lucky, at that. Your draw didn't beat Kesting's; it was jus' that he missed with his first slug."

"Guess again," the youngster said toughly. "The slug's in my shoulder. But...the hell with it! I ain't gonna die, Morgan." And in the dark he saw Mustang gazing at him with white face and hot, angry eyes. Mustang said, "I ain't gonna die. You hear? I'll still be aroun' to fight you for Jan...an' I

sure figure I'll have to fight you some day. Morgan."

Morgan met the young gaze steadily, under the starlight as the riders loped level.

He said, "I figure Miss Jan'll make her choice when the time comes, Mustang. It mightn't be you or me. It wouldn't be no use fightin' over her. An' look, boy, while we're layin' our cards on the table, let me give you some advice. Don't let the killin' of Kesting go to your head. The truth is that he weren't much more than an average gunman, about the same as yourself. There're plenty o' men in the Pecos who'd blast you pronto, Mustang, if you was fool enough to buck 'em."

"Like you, mebbe?" Mustang asked.

"Like me, mebbe," Morgan said. He was tired of the youngster's attitude, and now he drew ahead, anxious to be back at the ranch.

By the time they reached it, Mustang was weak from his wound and swaying in the saddle. The ranchhouse was curiously dark and silent. It seemed a pity that Conchita's birthday party should have been broken up so abruptly.

But when the riders went to the corral they found it remarkably short of horses. The bunkhouse was empty. There was something wrong here, Morgan thought. Red helped Mustang on to a bunk and Morgan went to the house, calling Jan Tolson.

A small white-clothed figure came running from a doorway.

"Oh...Senor Morgan...it is you, yes? I was so frightened, here alone. I wait in the dark—"

"Alone?" Morgan frowned. "Why, Conchita, where's everybody? Didn't Jim Cooper and his lot get back? An' where's Miss Jan?"

"Miss Jan she iss gone. Everybody gone. Miss Jan she jus'...how you say? She jus' disappear."

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MORGAN could make no sense of Conchita's story. Neither could Red, who should have known her better. It seemed that after the shooting had taken all the men from the house, Jan had suggested that they prepare coffee for their return. She had sent Conchita to the kitchen and gone to change her dress, saying that she would join Conchita and help her.

But according to Conchita, Jan hadn't come to the kitchen. Conchita had gone to Jan's room then, but she wasn't there. She just wasn't anywhere, according to Conchita's excited story. She hadn't seen Jan since.

Jim Copper and the others from Four Mile, plus some of the second night crew from the Bluff who'd ridden to Four Mile at the sound of the shooting, had arrived back at the house and Conchita had told them her story. They had searched the house and corral and outbuildings thoroughly, but found no sign of the girl.

Then they had gone away, scattering over the range in a search, hoping by trying in a wide range of direction to find some sign of her in the dawn. It was close to dawn now.

"It don't make sense," Morgan said. "Mebbe she got anxious an' saddled a hoss an' went to Four Mile to see what was happenin'."

"She'd be back by now," Red said, puzzled. "Hell, I dunno!"

But Conchita was certain that Jan hadn't gone riding, volubly demanding whether or not she'd have heard the horse.

"I hear nothing!" she kept exclaiming. "No, hoss, no cry out...Miss Jan she jus'...she jus' vanish!"

"But she sure wouldn't wander off

on foot," Red said. "Hell...I reckon she didn't leave on her own say-so, at all. Or she'd have told Conchita she was goin'. I reckon she was took away by force."

"But Conchita didn't hear no hoss," Morgan reminded him. "A kidnapper wouldn't tote her over his shoulder, would he?"

Red made a helpless gesture. He said, "What're we gonna do? Reckon we oughta go join the search?"

"No," Morgan said. "I figure we want a clue as to what we're searchin' for, first. Let's stick around till daylight. Mebbe there'll be footmarks or something'. An' mebbe Jim Copper an' the boys'll be back by then. Meantime, we gotta look after Mustang. You any good at diggin' out bullets, Red?"

"I'll try anythin'," Red said.

Morgan helped him. Conchita kept up a supply of hot water and bandages. They made Mustang fairly comfortable and some of the hostility was gone from him as he thanked them.

DAWN LIGHTENED to daylight and Morgan examined the ground about the house. There were footmarks outside Jan Tolson's window. Large bootprints, they were, and deep in the dry earth, as if the owner were a big man or carried an extra weight, or maybe both. Morgan swore. He followed the bootmarks to where they gave out on a long glassy slope east of the house. The slope led up through scraggy sage and boxwoods to a ridge a quarter of a mile away. Morgan saw the whole picture.

The hombre had left his cayuse hitched to a tree on the ridge. He'd been in Jan's room waiting when she went to change her dress. He'd overpowered her in silence and taken her out through the window to the ridge; that was the reason Conchita had heard no horse.

But who? Morgan thought about that, his jaw tight. This was wild territory and there were bad men in a way that Morgan himself had never been bad. There were few women, and among those few Jan stood out like a golden flower. There must, he figured, have been many men willing to swoop when the opportunity offered.

The riders came in in a bunch before sunup. Jim Copper was with them and plenty worried. To Morgan he said, after Morgan had told him quickly of the shooting in the *Silver Ace*, "Hell, I guess the Square T is kinda fallin' apart at the seams. Jo Sale dead, Mustang outa action, an' now Miss Jan missin'. An' last night the damned Diamond J rustlers cleaned out our big herd from the Bluff."

Morgan took him to show him the bootmarks. Copper said, "Waal, looks like the kidnapper took her east. We'll search in that direction, kinda concentrated this time. We kinda lit out in a hurry an' not organised las' night. But I got the boys packin' their packs for a long ride an' this time we won't let up till we find the gal. The hell with the cattle, while Jan's missin'."

Morgan said, "I don't savvy what you said about losin' the herd from the Bluff. Didn't we have a ridin' crew at the Bluff las' night?"

"Sure we did. But after you an' Red an' Mustang left us at the coulee, the boys from the Bluff arrived. They'd heard the shootin' an' come arunning, anxious to help. But it's a slow ride from the Bluff to Four Mile, on account o' all them bouldered ridges in the way, an' when they got to us the rumpus was all over. It explains a lotta things, Morgan."

"Such as?" Morgan asked.

"Hell, man, can't you see it was planned? Remember how I said it was kinda queer, the way the raiders jus' shot at us in the coulee an' didn't try to mix it close? That's all they was doin', drawin' my other riders away from the Bluff. After which the J rustlers moved in an' drove our other herd from the Bluff without trouble."

"I see," Morgan said slowly. Then, "But the plan went even further 'an that, huh? The shootin' at Four Mile Coulee also drew us boys from the house, leavin' Conchita an' Miss Jan alone. That was when the kidnapper swooped."

"My Gawd, you're right!" the foreman said. "Hell, mebbe we'd save time by ridin' in strength straight to the Diamond J, instead o' tryin' to trail the kidnapper east. Mebbe he only went east to start us on a bum trail."

MORGAN'S eyes were slitted in thought. He said, "Look...there sure is a lot more that's queer 'bout this deal. I don't figure we'll find Miss Jan at the Diamond J at all. It don't make sense. Or rather, it would only make sense if the J outfit were nitwits, which they ain't."

"I don't savvy that," Copper said. "You tryin' to say that Jadehorn's outfit ain't concerned in the kidnappin'? That they jus' did the rustlin' an' the kidnapper jus' happened along at the right time to seize Miss Jan? That don't seem likely to me."

But Morgan was casting his thoughts back to last night in Valley End, and the excitement was mounting in him. Softly he said, "You wanta know somethin'? That Jadehorn's no fool. I seen it demonstrated las' night that he weren't. Whether he would have a gal kidnapped or not I don't know...but he sure wouldn't leave a mile-wide trail leadin' straight to his Diamond J if he did. You see, there's still somethin' queer about this deal, like I said. An' I figure I've got the answer...or part of it."

"I dunno." Jim Copper scratched a baffled head. "I still think Jadehorn took her...or had her took. He'd do anythin'. He's been rustlin' our stock, an' Circle M stock, for years."

"Sure he has," Morgan frowned. "But I kinda understan' that rustlin' is almos' routine with ranchers along the Pecos. I'll bet that only for Jan's foot bein' down kinda firm, this outfit would be doin' its share o' rustlin' also. Don't take offense, Jim. I'm only tryin' to show that Jadehorn ain't any worse than a lotta other ranchers. But kidnappin' a woman...that's a plumb different matter."

"All right, all right," Copper sighed. "What d'you figure we oughta do?"

"Cancel the search for Jan until I find out somethin'. That'll be easy, I reckon. I'll handle it, if you like. I'll need a few men, say four."

But he was forced to tell every detail of his theory and plan, before the foreman would agree. But he sure did agree in the end. Morgan had a convincing argument.

"Let me have Red, Georgia, Mossy an' Waldo," Morgan asked, and ten minutes later the five riders pulled out.

But they didn't ride east. They headed north, a little bit impatient, a lot sceptical. They had heard Morgan's theory from Copper and it hadn't gone down too well with them. Red said, "You plumb better be right, Morgan. You'll kinda have a lot to answer for if we're jus' wastin' time while Miss Jan's in danger."

"A plumb lot to answer for," Waldo said, one hand unconsciously touching the butt of his holstered gun.

Morgan looked at them with the fire between his lazy eyelids. He would never be able to look himself in the face, would never know another moment's peace as long as he lived, if it turned out that he was wrong. They would never know how much it meant to him to be right, he thought.

With the slow smile that wasn't necessarily mirth, he said, "I'm sure that we ain't wastin' time. Because two into one won't go, if I remember my schoolin'."

"Hell," Mossy said. "You don't have to talk in riddles."

"I ain't doin' that," Morgan said. "I'm statin' a fact. Red an' I was in Valley End las' night. So was Jade-

horn. So was a plumb lotta J hands. Accordin' to Jadehorn himself, an' a saloon gal named May, they'd been in town since sundown. All except that Kesting and Pasquale, an' the two or three riders that helped 'em shoot up the coulee."

"What in hell're you tryin' to prove?" Waldo asked.

"Can't you see?" Morgan said. "How many hands does Jadehorn employ, anyway? About a dozen, I've heard tell. Waal, he had a bunch of 'em in town with him las' night. Then who was doin' all that rustlin' at the Bluff? Who was carryin' off Miss Jan? Two into one won't go."

"But Kesting an' Pasquale an' three helpers was def'nitely on the prod las' night," Red said.

"Sure they were—at Four Mile Coulee. But they lit out to Valley End from there, an' before our boys arrived from the Bluff. Then who was doin' the rustlin' at the Bluff?"

"Hell—" Red said slowly. Then he shook his head, baffled. "But if Kesting's bunch wasn't mixed up in the rustlin' at the Bluff, that leaves us right back where we started. Why'd they jus' shoot up the coulee an' ride off, without tryin' to take beef?"

MORGAN grinned. He said. "There's an answer to that, an' I hope we can dig it up. I'm gonna try. The first guy I wanta see is Pasquale."

"We ain't gonna see him ridin' north, are we?" Red asked.

"I kinda hope so. He hit town late las' night an' likely he's still there. If he ain't we'll go lookin' for him in Diamond J territory. I'd a heap sooner find him in town."

After that they rode in silence, until Valley End was reached. They loped along the single, dusty street and piled off at the *Silver Ace*. They went inside, the five of them, bunched close together, alert for trouble. It was a cinch that, after the killing of Roy Kesting and the death of Jo Sale, any meeting between Diamond J and Square T hands would blaze into instant action.

But there seemed to be no J hands in the saloon. It was still early in the morning and there were few men about at all. Less than a dozen lounged along the bar. The Square T hands bought drinks and Morgan asked of the barkeep, "You seen that Mex they call Pasquale, o' the Diamond J?"

"I dunno him," the barkeep said. He was a little chubby man with sly eyes and lips that worked a lot when he spoke.

"Gus, what're you givin' us?" Red laughed. "O' course you know that bird!"

"I dunno nobody," Gus said. "I dunno nothin'. An' look, when you find the jasper you're lookin' for, make it some place else. I don't want no more shootin' in my saloon—"

"You don't seem to want anythin' at all," Red said. "I figure we'd better do our drinkin' at the other saloon, fellas. Let's go."

"Wait," Morgan said. Then, "All right, I'll be along later." He had just spotted a pretty but slightly faded blonde, who had looked out from a private door behind the bar, seen the Square T riders, and bobbed back out of sight. Red and the others walked out, and then Morgan vaulted lightly over the bar and strode to the door.

"Hey!" Gus cried. "What're you doin'? You can't go in there!"

"Don't bet on it," Morgan said, and he threw open the door, stepped through, and closed and locked it on the inside. He took no notice of the hammering at the door as he went along a hallway, looking for the faded blonde.

He heard a door slam. He went to it, tapped sharply, and called, "Don't be shy, May. I wanta talk to you. I want a dollar's worth of information."

The dollar fetched her, but she wasn't keen to talk. She was tallish and shapely but her prettiness was

tired. She said, "For Gawd's sake, get outa town. Hank Jadehorn an' some o' his boys are still here. There'll be hell."

"What 'bout Pasquale?" Morgan asked.

"He's here, too. He's...got a little Mex girl. He's likely with her now... over Martin's store."

"That's worth a dollar," Morgan said, and tossed her one.

He went out through the raging Gus's saloon and didn't see Red or the boys anywhere. He didn't bother. He found Martin's store. He went up the wooden fire-escape steps at the rear and on to a landing and looked through a window. A big swarthy-faced hombre was in there with a girl. Morgan grinned. Then he drew his gun and smashed a pane of glass and poked the gun through the gaping hole.

The couple parted in a hurry. Pasquale swore in Spanish and groped for his gun. Morgan said, "Don't be foolish, amigo; I've got the drop on you."

PASQUALE was on his feet and facing the window. His hand came away from the gunbutt. The dark-eyed little girl was flushed and annoyed, smoothing her disarranged clothes. Morgan said, "Please, the lovely senorita will keep her hands where I can see them? Me, I've kinda had some experience with the lovely ladies o' her race, who keep the danged oddest weapons in the dangest places. Thank you."

Pasquale said, "Lolita, who the hell's this hombre?"

"Tell him I'm Morgan of the Square T, Lolita," Morgan said. "An' tell him I wanta know who he was workin' for las' night."

"Tell the loco hombre Pasquale not know what he talks 'bout," Pasquale said. "Pasquale work for Senor Jadehorn like ever'body know. Tell him that, angel Lolita."

"Tell him he's partly a liar, Lolita," Morgan said. And he flashed his smile at the big Mex. "You don't work all the time for Jadehorn, huh, Pasquale? You an' Roy Kesting...you'd both work for anyone, anytime, who ever could pay you, huh?"

"No, no," the Mex spat. "We—"

"Yes, yes," said Morgan. "Las' night, for instance, when Jo Sale was killed at Four Mile Coulee, Hank Jadehorn didn't know anythin' about it. Kesting staged it for somebody else. Jadehorn's a rustler, sure, like a lotta others. But he sure wasn't reapin' the benefit of all the rustlin' that was done by his riders. That hombre Kesting was doin' jobs for other folks, an' gettin' paid for it, and paid well, for the way he always left the trail pointin' straight at Jadehorn. When I tell Hank that, which I'm goin' to, he'll kill you, Pasquale."

"Mebbe the so clever senor not get to tell anyone," the Mex said, and he crouched and went for his gun.

He sure must have been desperate to do that, with Morgan's Colt already trained at him. As his weapon crashed to the floor the Mex flipped his bullet-smashed hand and blood showered everywhere. His face was white. Lolita sobbed.

Leaning at the broken window with his gun breathing smoke, Morgan said, "That was plumb silly, amigo. But it tol' me one thing sure, that what I said about you workin' for somebody else las' night was true. You an' Kesting and your three pards drew all the Square T hands to Four Mile while somebody pulled a double raid on the T. They got our big herd from the Bluff an' they kidnapped Miss Jan. Now all I wanta know is who? Start talkin'."

Pasquale showed no eagerness to talk, but just the same he wasn't comfortable. His face was white with pain and his smashed hand dripped blood. Morgan said, "I'll smash the other one, Pasquale. Or an elbow. Or mebbe

a knee. Somethin' that'll give you hell, but leave you conscious, jus, so you'll talk. I ain't leavin' till you talk."

Pasquale swore, the Spanish words rumbling. Morgan fired and the bullet took away the tip of a finger on his other hand. Lolita sobbed loudly. Morgan said, "I'm a hard hombre; I'll smash your bones one by one an' then I'll start on the gal. Unless you talk."

And then Pasquale talked. He told who had hired Kesting to draw the T riders from the bluff and from the house. He told where Jan Tolson was to be taken. Morgan listened in utter amazement at first, because it seemed to him that the thing Pasquale was saying just wasn't possible. But then he realised that the man would have not had the knowledge or the reason to lie in this manner, and he cast his mind back and remembered that, yes, it just was possible after all.

"Gracios, amigo," Morgan said, the fire flashing in his eyes. "I'd advise you to get your hands fixed an' ride for the border an' keep ridin'. Because after I get Miss Jan back I'm sure gonna have a word in Hank Jadehorn's ear."

He hurried down the fire-escape to the ground and round to the street. He was in time to hear gunfire. It sounded from down the street aways, and he saw his four Square T companions running from a saloon. Scattered gunshots came from the saloon and the T riders threw hurried lead in reply.

Morgan swore. The last thing he wanted to be bothered with right now was a gunfight in which the strength of his little band might be lessened. He was going to need them all, for the job in hand. He swore again as he noticed that one man, Waldo, had been hit in the arm.

"Thisaway!" Morgan yelled. "Let's ride!" He reached the waiting horses from the opposite direction and all five men piled into the saddles and kicked for speed. They rode hard, hunched in the saddles as lead whined about them in a vicious farewell.

"Hell," Red said, out along the trail aways. "We was kinda outnumbered. A bunch o' J hands came in while we was drinkin' an' got the drop on us. To make it worse, some o' the citizens took their side, jus' for the hell of it. Can you beat that?"

"I can beat it for news." Morgan yelled, riding hard. "Right now we're on our way to rescue Jan Tolson. I found out where she's held."

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WALDO WAS pretty sick. That unlucky Diamond J bullet had gone through the flesh of his arm and he was losing blood. The riders hauled back. Hurriedly Morgan said, "Let's bind it an' stop the bleedin' before you fall outa the saddle. Then one of us can see you back to the ranch—"

"Like hell!" Waldo growled. "Bind it. I can get home by myself, blast it! But I sure wish I could've helped you rescue Miss Jan."

Red, Mossy, the lean Georgia, and Keen Morgan continued over the open range to the southeast. They rode at a steady pace that got them along quickly without exhausting their mounts. There was a long ride in front of them and it was no time for flat-out speed.

Red said, "Cottonwood Camp, huh? It's got me beat. These hombres you tell us about...why in hell would they take Jan to that cabin in the trees. It bein' her own property an' all."

"Reckon I know the answer to that," Morgan said. "They figured that her disappearance would start a hue-an'-cry an' they didn't wanta be caught with her. They had to get her hid quick. That cabin was a good place

to hide her in daylight. I guess they was gonna shift her further away durin' tonight. It was a danged clever plan. They knew we wasn't gonna search a cabin on our own range. An' they knew, too, that with the disappearance o' Jan we was gonna say, like Jim Copper said, 'the hell with the cattle'. . . which would give 'em time to get that big Bluff herd away without bein' bothered by 'em."

Red nodded in understanding. But something still bothered him.

"Was that the only reason they took Jan? To throw us off the trail o' the stole beef. I mean? Or—" He shrugged.

Morgan's face was tight and the fire in his eyes was a promise of death to somebody. He said, "No, I reckon it wasn't the only reason."

It was mid-afternoon when at last the riders reined back cautiously among timber to look at the ridge of cottonwoods a mile away. There was no sign of life, no smoke coming from the cabin chimney the way it had been the first time Morgan had seen it.

"But o' course there wouldn't be." Red said. "They ain't gonna advertise that they're in the cabin—if they are. Look, are you sure 'bout all this, Morgan?"

"Plumb sure," Morgan said. "With both hands wounded, an' four bullets left in my gun, Pasquale's story had the ring o' truth in it. Waal, look, we'll leave this belt o' timber from behind an' kinda circle to the cabin along hollow ground. We gotta get there unseen, to surprise 'em. I dunno how many hombres there'll be."

"This's your party," Red said. "You lead, we'll tag along."

It was rough expression of loyalty to which the others nodded agreement and it made Morgan feel good. He led the way along the detour, sacrificing time in the care to keep to low ground and out of sight.

A LONG TIME later they were at the foot of the ridge to the left of the cabin. They hitched their mounts to trees and went in and up through the cottonwoods.

They moved carefully, almost like Indians, avoiding the crackle of brush and fallen leaves, and the distance to the cabin grew less. Morgan grouped his bunch together when they were twenty feet from the building. He whispered, "Can't hear anything. But I'm gonna go to the window. Wait here. . . one pair o' boots that close will be plenty."

They nodded, hands on gunbutts. Morgan crept toward the cabin. For a terrible moment he wondered whether Pasquale had lied after all, and all this sneaking around was for nothing. He reached the cabin window and looked in. On the other side of the glass a face grinned at him, and a sixgun menaced him. The sixgun blasted.

Morgan's hair-trigger alertness sent him hurtling back even as the bullet spattered broken glass all over him. Shocked and cut but escaping the bite of the bullet, he sprawled in the dust, and at that moment all hell broke loose in the cottonwoods.

Powder blasted and lead whammed into flesh and timber as men came from behind cottonwood trees to catch Red and his two friends unaware. The Square T cowboys cursed and they were shooting. Morgan, scrambling from the ground, cursing the bad luck of having led his boys into a trap, saw that grinning face come out of the cabin window and the sixgun point down at him. As the sixgun blasted, Morgan was drawing his Colt and falling flat. The slug went overhead and Morgan fired from the ground.

He saw the grinning face of a man named Shaeter reel backwards into the cabin with blood spurting from between the eyes. Then something crashed on Morgan's head and he lost consciousness.

It was like waking from a peaceful sleep, except that when you woke from

a sleep you could stretch your arms and legs. Morgan could do neither. A lot of tightly knotted rope interferred He was lying on an earthen floor. Memory flooded back into him. He rolled over and blinked his eyes and things came into focus. And people. A man he knew, a very tall guy with scowling face and colorless eyes. Red and Georgia, bound hand and foot like himself. And Jan Tolson.

Jan was still in her party dress of the night before, though it was ripped and rumpled. She was tied with ropes to a chair, and she was gagged. She tried to smile at Morgan and he tried just as hard to smile back at her.

He looked at the tall, scowling hombre who leaned against a cabin wall smoking. He said, "Howdy, Pine."

The Canadian called Pine was as surly as ever. He spat. He said, "Morgan you made a slight mistake. We seen you an' your friends in that timber clump a mile away. We got field glasses. We waited an' you walked plumb into our trap."

Morgan sighed. Then he remembered. He said "Anyway we dented your danged trap, huh? Shaeter got it where it finished him."

Jan made a sobbing, groaning noise behind her gag. Red, blood welling from one bound leg, squirmed in his ropes. Georgia was unconscious, from a blow on the head, judging by the trickle of blood from his scalp.

Morgan swore in his mind at the sad loss of Mossy. He said, "You didn't do all this damage yourself, Pine."

Pine agreed that he hadn't. He said "Pinky, another hombre who joined up with us after you...left..... But he stopped a bullet in the ruckus an' he's outside, unconscious. Mebbe he'll die. An' that jus' leaves me, till Lew Bradlow gets here. I'm right glad Pinky could help me to tie up you hombres before he conked."

Red writhed angrily in his bonds. He spat, "How the hell did it happen! Four of us put outa action by three... an' one o' the three dyin' right at the start."

"The gaunt hombre died at the start too," Pine said. "Morgan was right handy for a clout on the head an' that fixed him. It was kinda easy, because you was all surprised in a trap." Then he sneered. "Morgan is purty good at makin' mistakes. He made the biggest of his life when he shot Lew Bradlow an' figured he was dead. Bradlow's a tough hombre. Right now he's as good as new. He'll be here soon. He'll sure be glad to see you, Morgan, you double-crossin' coyote!"

MORGAN was thinking, fitting together the pieces of information Pine had let fall. He said, "You attended to kidnappin' Miss Jan, huh Pine? While Bradlow an' Kid Chaney an' the Maynard brothers rustled the Bluff herd. Bradlow hired Roy Kesting an' four Diamond J hombres to draw all our boys from both places. Kidnappin' the gal was to throw us off the trail o' the rustled beef until it was safe across the Pecos, an' apart from that, Bradlow always...always wanted Jan Tolson. Waal, what happens next?"

"Can't you guess?" Again Pine sneered. "Bradlow's comin' back here at sundown, which ain't far off. We'll fix you hombres so you'll suffer... burnin' the cabin might be a good idea. Then we'll be off to catch up with the herd, crossin' the river into the hills with sweet Jan our pris'ner. Then, I guess, we'll start squabblin' over her ...but that won't bother you fellas. You'll be dead as they come."

Pine walked away to the cabin window, watching for Bradlow. Morgan heard Red swearing helplessly. He heard Georgia groaning back into consciousness.

Pine was still facing away. He lit a new cigaret. Morgan let out a hushed, sudden little cry.

"Ah..."

Pine whirled from the window. Morgan lay still, staring at him. Pine walked a pace nearer. He said, "What's goin' on?"

"Nothin'," Morgan said, his voice a shade higher than usual. And as Pine approached nearer he rolled his body on the floor, keeping his bound hands out of sight. He said, "Nothin' at all."

Pine smiled. "You're a lousy actor Morgan. Let's see them hands... you've got 'em loose or somethin'."

He bent low to look. He tried to roll Morgan over. Morgan's bound legs jack-knifed up with blinding speed the heels of his boots crashing into the tall guy's face to send him smashing back against the wall and crumpled to a sitting position at the bottom.

"My Gawd!" Red cried. "You might be a bad actor, but anyway you've killed that hombre."

"Killed him nothin'," Morgan said. Already he had spotted a knife on a table and he rolled, upsetting the table. He got his bound wrists to the knife and began to grope to pick it up. From there, reaching his bonds with the blade, round there behind him where he couldn't see, was a masterpiece of wriggling and patience. He began to saw.

It took a long time. He cut himself a dozen times. But he cut the rope too. at last, and his hands came free. In a moment he had his feet free and was standing.

Jan's wide blue eyes above her gag were excited. Morgan went to her and gently removed the gag. He slashed at the ropes that held her to the chair. He found the gun that had been taken from his holster and holstered it. Then he stepped across to Red.

"Hold it!" a harsh voice said.

JAN CRIED out. Morgan froze, then slowly stood upright caught cold with the gun, which had been in his hand He turned and saw Lew Bradlow standing at the door with somebody else close behind.

Bradlow's gun was out and a grin of triumph and surprise split his whiskered face. "Waal, if it ain't Morgan! My ol' pard with the soft heart!"

"Damn you!" Morgan said softly, tempted to gamble everything and go for his gun. Bradlow laughed.

"Don't draw or I'll kill you," he a moment earlier, now in his holster. said. His eyes roved from the dishevelled girl who was trying to gather the torn dress about herself, to the bound figures on the floor and the unconscious Pine sitting against the wall and the dead body of Shaeter.

"Seems like you have been havin' a lotta fun here, Morgan. Dead an' dyin' men, outside an' in. But the fun's over, Morgan."

"Morgan?" a voice said. "Did you say Morgan?" And the man behind Bradlow pushed forward into the cabin.

He was Kid Chaney. His eyes blazed at Morgan. He said, "Waal, look who's here. You killed Toss Riley, you polecat. Lew told me. I'm gonna kill you—"

"You still cryin' about Toss Riley?" Morgan smiled. "Hell—"

"I'm gonna kill you," the kid broke in. He stepped further into the cabin. Bradlow stepped in after him. Chaney said, "Lew, you gotta let me. This hombre's my meat."

"I ain't stoppin' you," Bradlow said. "Put lead in his belly. It hurts bad down there. I'll be knockin' off them tied hombres an' then we'll hit the trail with the gal—"

"Like hell you will!" a voice called and then the bark of a sixgun roared in the cabin.

Bradlow stumbled, trying to throw a shot at the cabin window. Morgan had a brief, wonderful glimpse of Mustang there at the window, his gun spitting death, and in a blinding instant

Morgan's own gun came out to join the chorus.

The cabin was filled with flying lead, but after the first shot or two it was all flying the one way. Then Mustang, at the window, and Morgan in the cabin, looked at the dirt floor and through their haze of gunsmoke they saw the bodies of Chaney and Bradlow, both riddled.

"Mustang!" Morgan cried. "You loco hombre! With a plugged-up shoulder an' all. How'd you get here?"

"I rid a cayuse," Mustang said with sarcasm. "What's a bored shoulder? When Waldo got back to the ranch an' said you was headed here to rescue Jan, d'you think I could jus' lie on my bunk?"

"No, Mustang, you couldn't!" Jan cried, laughing and crying together. "You just couldn't!"

She ran across the cabin and kissed the young puncher full on the lips. Mustang went white. He murmured, "Shucks—Jan—shucks—"

Then Jan came to Morgan and into his arms and kissed him also, only this time it was different. Plenty different. She said, "You needn't buy that guitar Keen. That final sixgun music was the Sweetest I've ever heard. Thanks—to you an' Mustang."

" 'Specially to you," Mustang said, and the hardness went out of his face, like a long fight was over and he'd lost and it didn't matter any more. He said, "That's that! Waal, so long's you call your first kid Mustang—"

Some time later at the ranch-house, Morgan told Jan of plans other than his marrying her. They had to do with the Square T.

"That Hank Jadehorn was a rustler, sure, but he was kinda doin' it in self-protection like a lotta others. An' not as much as we was blamin' him for, seein' that his crooked foreman was doin' jobs for others as well. I reckon it wouldn't take much to turn Hank as honest—" He grinned. "As honest as I've turned out to be."

"What d'you have in mind?" Jan asked eagerly.

"Peace between the Diamond J an' the Square T. A kinda solid alliance against the rustlers. That way, we'd both be so strong we'd have nothin' to worry 'bout."

"It's a wonderful idea," the girl said.

They were interrupted by squeals of girlish wrath and the stern voice of a man. Jan jumped up, excited. She cried, "My goodness! Look, Keen!"

They watched Red stride purposefully from the kitchen door to his saddled horse. In his strong arms the dark-eyed Conchita kicked and struggled, yet somehow with a note of delight coloring her screaming protests.

Red was saying, "My frien' Mustang says there's only one way to handle you wildcats. I'm takin' you to the preacher if I have to tie your hands an' make you stand in front of him while he says his stuff with my sixgun at his head!"

He rode away into the sunset with Conchita a mussed-up, laughing, happy bundle across his saddle.

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SLOW MAN, FAST GUN

by GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

Mace Deming was fast with a gun, but he still resorted to trickery in most cases. And Andy Fraser wasn't as fast as his brother, whose draw Deming had beaten.

ANDY FRASER swung his saddle up on the top rail of the corral. "How was my brother killed?"

Shorty Barton shoved back his sweat-stained hat and felt for the makings. "There was a little argument between him and Mace Deming about cards. Mace didn't do nothin' that night. It ain't like Mace to take a chance, although I allow he could have outdrawed Jim."

Andy scratched his jaw. "Jim was a fast man with a cutter, Shorty."

Shorty rolled a smoke and handed the makings to Andy. "Yeh," he said softly, "but Mace don't depend on speed to beat a man. If there's a dirty trick in the book...or *out* of it, Deming will use it to gain the edge."

"What happened?"

Shorty lit his smoke. "Like I said: nothing happened the night of the argument. Next morning Jim had breakfast at the hotel and then went to get his cayuse. Mace was in Dobson's Livery office, waitin' like a damned cougar for a lost calf. It was a bright day. Jim walked into the stable. Mace called him. They went for their cutters but Mace had the edge—his eyes was used to the darkness. Jim got three .44 slugs in the gut."

Andy lit his smoke and looked away from the little wrangler. His throat was dry and the tobacco smoke made him cough. He looked beyond the low log buildings of his little spread to where the Mogollon Rim lifted against the bright Arizona sky. He and Jim could have made something out of the Lazy F, but Jim had had gambler's blood and damned good luck running with it as a team. Jim hated the sweat of the summer and the cold of the winter. The long lonely days at the ranch had driven him to Holbrook and to the life he really wanted. Silk shirts and fifty dollar hats; a pocket full of eagles, and his pick of the Holbrook fillies. Now he was gone, and something of Andy had died with the younger brother who was his only kin.

Shorty coughed. "The coroner's jury rendered a verdict of self-defense. Mace Deming is free on the streets of Holbrook."

Andy flipped away the tasteless cigarette. "Stay here, Shorty. I'll be gone a couple of days."

Shorty came close. "You ain't goin' to face him, are you?"

"What would *you* do?"

Shorty spat. "I guess I would go, too. There's one big difference, Andy; I'm no streak of lightning with a six-gun but I can outdraw *you* without half trying."

Andy nodded. "I know. I never had any call to spend time practicing a fast draw, Shorty. Time and cartridges would have been wasted. I'm a rancher, not a killer."

Shorty waved a hand. "All the same,

Deming liked to make it appear as if his opponent had a fair shake.

Andy: you don't often have to rely on speed in jerking out your cutter, but when you *do* have to, it's a mighty comforting habit."

Andy started for the house. "A Winchester is all I need for varmints and sticky loopers."

"You ain't goin' after him with a Winchester, are you?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You keep away from Holbrook, you hear?"

ANDY TURNED and gripped the short man by the arm. "Listen." he said quietly, "maybe you don't know me very well, Shorty."

"I've worked for you three years!"

"You can live with a man for *fifty* years and not know everything about him. You think I can sleep nights and work days thinking of that grinning coyote there in Holbrook sporting another notch? A notch he can say tallies a Fraser? I've got myself to live with, Shorty." Andy started on again for the house throwing his last words back across his shoulder. "Saddle my claybank!"

Andy came out of the house ready for his ride to town. He wore the black

suit that he used about four times a year. His cartridge belt creaked dryly as he walked to the claybank. Shorty leaned against the corral fence. "Andy!" he called, "draw!"

Andy whipped back his coat and slapped his hand down on the butt of his Colt. It was no use. Shorty's six-gun was leveled at his waist, pointing at Andy's gut. Their eyes met over the Colt. "You see?" Shorty asked softly, "Don't be a damned fool, Andy. Mace would have cut *me* down before my gun had cleared leather."

Andy flushed. He remembered the hours Jim had spent out behind the barn, holding a poker chip on the back of his out-stretched right hand, dropping the hand and then drawing and firing his Colt before the chip hit the ground. There was another stunt of his that Andy had liked, despite the waste of time in developing it. Jim would fill a cartridge box with talcum powder, balance it on the back of his hand, drop the hand for a draw and hit the cartridge box with a slug before it reached the ground. Andy could still Jim's grinning face through the haze of talcum and powdersmoke, etched on his memory. Jim's waste of time had annoyed Andy, but he had been proud of him all the same.

Andy swung up on the claybank. "When Kelly comes in you tell him to mend those fences down by the east waterhole." He touched the horse with his spurs and rode toward the gate. Shorty shook his head and went into the barn. Andy had been the best boss he had ever worked for.

Holbrook was sleeping in the late afternoon sun as Andy rode into the town. It was too early for the hell-raising that was typical of a Holbrook night. Andy usually avoided the town, not because it was said that it was the only county seat in the whole United States without a church, but because the town was dominated by the waddies of the Aztec Land and Cattle Company, commonly called the Hashknife outfit. Andy had had his share of troubles with Hashknife men who weren't too particular whose cattle they herded.

ANDY TURNED the claybank into Dobson's and dismounted. Amos Dobson came out of his little office. His face paled as he saw Andy. "Mace Deming ain't left town," he said quickly.

Andy nodded. "Saves me a ride then."

"Don't be a fool! Jim is laid out at the undertaker's parlor. Go see him and keep away from Mace. He's already said he'd take care of *you,* too, if you stuck your face in town."

Andy rolled a smoke. "Did Jim have a chance?"

Dobson shook his head. "Didn't Shorty tell you?"

"Yes."

"Mace *might* have beaten Jim in a fair draw; I don't know. Jim was mighty fast. But Mace always works the odds to suit himself. Come into the office, I've got a bottle."

They sat down and Dobson filled the glasses. The liveryman leaned his chair back against the wall and hooked his heels over the bottom rung. "Yes-sir!" Dobson repeated softly, "Mace always works the odds to suit himself."

"How many notches does he have now?"

"Five. No. . .six."

"You know everything that ever happened in Holbrook. Tell me about the first five killings."

Dobson half closed his eyes. "First man was a breed who got drunk and fell over a poker table while Mace had a good hand. Mace hit him. The breed pulled a gun while he was on the floor. Mace got him through the head. Second man was a whiskey drummer from Chicago. He wouldn't get out of Mace's way one night; never had a chance. Mace always claimed the drummer

pulled a stingy gun but no one ever believed *that* whopper. Sure, they found a derringer in the dead man's hand but there's more than one of us believed it was Mace's own gun."

Andy drained his glass and refilled it. He settled back in his chair. "Go on."

"Third man was a city marshal; good man with a gun. He and Mace had words. One night there was gunfire over on Central street. The marshal was killed. A hurdy-gurdy girl claims she saw the marshal try to buffalo Mace. Seems as though she and Mace were cosy with each other. There weren't any other witnesses. Fourth man was a gambler from Santa Fe. Accused Mace of cheating; when the smoke cleared he had a slug in his heart. Fifth man was a kid from the Double H spread, in town for a good time. He was a little on the noisy side, being drunk and all. Mace told him to be quiet. The kid didn't back down. They was standing close to each other at the bar. Mace threw his hat in the kid's face and shot him afore he got his cutter out. You already know what happened to Jim."

Andy rolled a smoke and lit it. He eyed Dobson over the flare of the lucifer. "First man was drunk. Second man probably wasn't armed, and probably couldn't have shot straight anyway. Third man was killed under suspicious circumstances. Fourth man *might* have had a chance. Fifth man didn't. Neither did Jim from what Shorty told me. It all adds up."

"To what?"

"Mace depends a lot on bluff and trickery."

"Yeh. Yeh..." Dobson unhooked his heels and brought his chair down hard. "But Mace always wins any shooting contest in town. I've seen him outdraw dozens of men on a bet. I like you, Andy. You're a rancher, not a killer or town bum, but you haven't got the sense the Lord gave a stray lamb to come in here looking for trouble."

Andy raised his eyebrows. "*Me?* Why, Amos! How you misjudge me."

Dobson spat. "You ain't foolin' me, Andy."

Andy leaned back and puffed at his cigaret. Dobson stood up. "I've got an errand. You want to sit here a spell and watch the place?"

"Keno! I've got some thinking to do."

DOBSON hurried out. Somewhere to the north there was a low rumble of thunder as though Navajo drums were beating. A cool wind searched through the stable and banged a door. Andy stood up, balanced a matchbox on the back of his hand, dropped the hand and went for his Colt. The matchbox hit the floor before the Colt cleared the skirt of Andy's coat. He tried it again and was even slower. He sat down and rubbed his jaw. Suddenly he jerked open a drawer in Dobson's desk. A short-barreled double-action .44 lay there. Andy had seen it there before. Dobson had taken it in lieu of cash from a busted gambler to pay a livery bill. Andy inspected the weapon. The barrel had been cut down to two inches. The front of the trigger guard had been cut off for easy access to the trigger. Every sharp corner that could be rounded had been worked over with a file. The front sight was gone. It was a firstclass hideout gun, a stingy gun that could be whipped out of a pocket or from beneath a coat with nothing to catch on clothing.

Andy emptied the gun and hefted it. It felt odd to a hand used to the perfect balance of a Frontier Colt; yet the action was silk smooth. Andy reloaded it and placed it on the desk. An idea had begun to take shape in his mind.

Rain was pattering on the roof of the stable when Dobson returned. The big drops hit the baked earth of the street and threw up puffs of dust. The sound of windows being closed hurriedly came from the nearby buildings. Dobson

closed the back door of the stable and lit a lamp. He leaned against the side of the office door and looked at Andy. "Mace is at the hotel eatin', " he said. He eyed the stingy gun. "Funny-lookin' thing, ain't it?"

Andy nodded. "Can I borrow it?"

"Sure."

"I'll leave my sixgun if you want it."

Dobson grinned. "You think I depend on them damned little things? Look!" He reached behind him and held up a sawed-off Greener double-gun. "Loaded with Blue Whistlers with split wads. Ain't no man in his right sense, fast draw and all, that can, or will, buck up against this scattergun."

Andy slid the hideout gun into his coat pocket. "I've got some shopping to do," he said quietly. "Where does Mace hang out of an evening?"

"The *Silver Dollar.*"

"Bueno! I'll see you later, Amos."

ANDY GOT his slicker from his saddle, shrugged into it, and stepped out into the greasy-looking street. Water was running over the hard surface and filling the shallow ditches along the walks. Here and there a man or woman ran for cover. It was dusk and the cheerful yellow lights of lamps shone out into the downpour turning the big drops into silvery pellets. Andy plodded down to the nearest general store and went in. He looked over the notions counter until he found a piece of elastic wrapped about a gay card. "Every Woman's Friend," he read to himself. He grinned.

"You say something?" the clerk called.

Andy shook his head. He tapped on the glass showcase filled with cartridges, gun oil, fancy butt plates and other gun accessories. "Box of forty-fours. Not them in the dusty boxes, one of them fresh boxes."

The clerk looked hurt. "None of these cartridges are over a year old, friend."

Andy looked him in the eye. "Give me a fresh box or I'll go somewheres else."

The clerk took out a fresh box and eyed the elastic. "You want that, too?"

"Yes."

"For the wife, no doubt."

"No doubt."

The clerk grinned. "Handy stuff, ain't it?"

"Sure is. Throw in a sack of Durham, too."

Andy stowed his purchases in his coat pocket and paid for them. He left the store and stood for a time underneath the wooden awning looking up the street toward the bright lights of the *Silver Dollar.* Then he turned up his slicker collar and plodded the other way toward a small restaurant.

While his steak was being fried he went out to the privy, stripped off his slicker and coat, reloaded the stingy gun with fresh cartridges and tied the elastic to the trigger guard of the gun. He experimented a few times and then put on his coat and slicker, returning to the restaurant.

He ate slowly. He was afraid; there was no use denying it. Any man who'd deny being afraid under such circumstances was either a liar or a damned fool. The steak and potatoes were good but the blueberry pie tasted like plaster of paris. He didn't finish the pie, swallowed the black coffee and left the restaurant.

The rain had settled down to a steady drizzle. He walked slowly back to the livery stable. Amos was sound asleep on some baled hay. Andy sat down in the office and smoked. The beat of the rain lulled him, but every time he dozed off he thought of Mace Deming and awoke with a start. The dusty wall clock showed nine o'clock when at last he stood up, ground out his cigaret and carried his slicker to his horse. For a moment he stood there in the darkness with the claybank, stroking it, and then he left the stable.

The rain was falling softly now. Andy shivered a little as he hurried across the street to the shelter of an awning. A man stepped out of a doorway. It was Denny O'Brien, a special policeman. "Oh, it's you, Andy," he said. He eyed Andy speculatively.

"Evenin', Denny."

O'Brien looked up and down the street. "You come alone, Andy?"

"Why? Did you expect the Lazy F corrida?"

O'Brien shook his head. "You've come after *him* then?"

"You aim to stop me?"

O'Brien took out a pack of ready-mades, slightly damp from the rain and offered them to Andy. He scratched a lucifer on his thumbnail and lit the cigaret. Andy eyed him in the wavering light of the match. "Well?"

O'Brien lit a smoke for himself and flipped the match into the gutter. "Deming's third killin' was Marshal Phil Apperson. Did you know him, Andy?"

"I saw him a few times in town. Nice looking hombre."

O'Brien nodded. "He was my brother-in-law, liked to have killed my sister, too." The policeman looked toward the *Silver Dollar*. "Well, I'm due at the far end of town to check a Mex *baile*. See you later, Andy." The big officer squelched off through the mud.

Andy stood for a moment under the awning and then went on toward the *Silver Dollar*. A man stepped under the awning of the saloon, shivered a little and shook the water from his hat. He looked at Andy and said quietly, "Oh, Lord." He pushed hurriedly through the batwings.

ANDY stopped outside the saloon. A piano tinkled unsteadily. Somewhere farther up the street a woman laughed. A man rode past the saloon splattering mud and water over the wooden walk. Andy threw down his cigaret and stepped carefully on it. He buttoned his coat all the way up and pushed through the batwings. The big smoke-filled room was quiet. Not a chip rattled. Now and then feet grated on the floor. The piano died off. Andy stopped at the end of the bar. Two men stood midway down the bar watching him. One of them was the man who had entered just ahead of Andy. He walked away from the bar and stood beside the piano. The other man was Mace Deming.

Andy rested his left hand on the molding along the edge of the high bar. He gripped his right lapel with his right hand. Deming emptied his glass and eyed Andy. He was a fairly big man, slightly gone to flesh from the soft living in town. His eyes were a cold green and his thick black mustache accentuated the pallor of his face. His ivory-butted Colt was carried in a high riding Missouri holster angled back, the mark of a man who didn't spend most of his time in a saddle. "You lookin' for me, Fraser?" he asked calmly.

Andy nodded. The bartender faded quietly back around the end of the bar. Feet scraped as men moved away from the line of fire. The rain sluiced heavily against the windows. Deming shifted a little, moving so that his gun was clear of the bar. He was like a big cat, watching for a chance. Cold sweat worked down Andy's sides. In a minute or two he might be dead.

Deming raised his right hand and placed it on the bar. The light from a dozen harp lamps reflected from the big diamond ring he wore. "Jim came lookin' for *me*," he said softly, "it was a fair fight."

Andy spat deliberately. "You're a damned liar," he said thinly. "A lousy twobit tinhorn. I've come to ram that lie about fair play right down your fat throat."

"Good Lord," a man said hoarsely, "Fraser *wants* to die!"

Deming shifted a little. *Waiting for his chance,* thought Andy. *Waiting for*

the edge. When Deming *did* move his speed surprised Andy. He swept up a bottle from the bar with his right hand and hurled it at Andy. His hand went down for the draw. Andy turned sideways and jerked his left arm down hard, meanwhile ducking the bottle. The stingy gun, hanging from the elastic, slid into his left hand. Deming rushed in, reaching with his left to block Andy's right hand. His Colt came up. The hideout gun rapped three times. Deming grunted. His Colt crashed, driving a slug into the floor. He dropped the sixgun, reached out his left hand as though to hold onto Andy and then staggered through the door, smashing the batwings back. His boots slammed the boardwalk and then there was a thud as he hit the street.

Andy released the stingy gun. It rose up beneath his coat sleeve. He looked about the room. No one spoke. He turned slowly and walked out of the saloon. Deming lay face-down in the mud, his clawed fingers deeply buried in the mire. Andy stepped to one side as the men in the saloon crowded past him to look at Mace Deming.

Andy rolled up his coat collar. "I'll be at Dobson's Livery if anyone wants me," he said quietly.

He walked back through the driving rain. Somewhere he had seen a Colt Peacemaker with an engraved barrel: *Fear no man, no matter his size. Call on me. I'll equalize.* The words seemed etched in his mind as he entered the livery stable.

He untied the stingy gun and replaced it in the desk drawer. He felt his way through the darkness to the rows of baled hay and laid down. He closed his eyes. *He had equalized.* It wouldn't bring back Jim, nor the others who had been cut down by Mace Deming, but Andy had *equalized.* He could go back to the Lazy F now; he could live with himself again.

★

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GLINT OF GOLD

A Western "If" Story

by Harold Gluck

THE STORY of the American West is made up of many dramatic episodes. These have been told and retold both in the form of true fact as well as in fiction. Often, you and I have wondered whether things might have been different IF events turned out the other way.

Suppose Billy-the-Kid had killed Pat Garrett instead of being on the losing end of a sixgun? Would it have really made much difference in the history of the West? The answer to that is probably NO, for Billy the Kid would sooner or later have been killed by somebody else.

Suppose the Mexicans defeated General Houston, and even won the war of 1846? Would that have made a difference in the history of the West? Chances are it would have changed the destiny of our country.

Suppose Kit Carson never had met Fremont, would it have been very important? Fremont would have used another mountain man and trapper as his guide. Probably Kit Carson would have continued being a good man, but not famous; still, the effect on the West would have been nil.

This is an IF story. It is made up of fact and fiction. Read it and enjoy it. But see if you can put your finger on the incident where the IF begins. For at that second when the IF happens, history is changed in an entirely different direction. You may not agree with the IF results. We readily admit that the IF possibilities can be more than one and virtually unlimited. But don't worry, for now our story begins...

MY NAME is John August Sutter. On my birth certificate my first name was given as Johann. But what are names and titles? They are useful items to be of service when you wish to impress people, but the best items of all are success, deeds, and money. There are those who will tell you I was essentially a dreamer. To a certain extent they are correct; every great accomplishment was based on a dream turned into daringness.

In the year 1833 I was what best can be termed an apparently discouraged man and something of a business failure. I was married, and lived in a small town in Switzerland. My wife bore unto me four children. It was not easy in those days to feed hungry mouths when you were just a nobody in Europe. I was then thirty years of age, and my business consisted of selling clothing. Somehow my books did not balance, for my expenses were always greater than my income.

ALL THIS was not my fault, for inside of me something kept whispering that I was a man of Destiny. It is this that can keep a man's head above water while the elements attempt to drown him. But I was certain I would not find my Destiny in that small Swiss Town; what I needed was a country yet to be tamed, one ripe for a man of courage, vision, and willing to work hard. So I told my wife the news.

"It is useless for me to remain here any longer; my creditors are pressing me. I will pack my few belongings and go to Paris. From there I will be able to get a boat to America. It is a land of rich opportunity; you remain here with the children. I shall try my best to send you money. We shall meet again, but only God knows when."

She cried, but knew it would be useless to try to restrain me in any manner. As for my father-in-law, I was certain he would not permit his daughter and his grandchildren to starve.

I finally landed at Le Havre for it was from that place that the ships sailed to America. The port and the surrounding territory was crowded with men waiting for a chance to book passage on a ship. They all had the same destination as myself: America.

"In that country all people are equal," said a man to me who had lived many years in Prussia. "You need not bow down to any noble for none exist. There is freedom and it is for all. The men say that with hard work in a few years you can save up your wealth. And neither ruler nor the petty princes can touch your money; you can also pray to your God in your own manner."

I listened to him and to others speak. It helped me pass the time away while waiting for passage. Finally in the summer of 1834 I sailed for America. The boat reeked of poverty. They were hungry and tired men. A few possessions in a small bag. At night I would watch the moonbeams play on the water.

"I must get something to be able to have a lot. From a little big things can happen. But first there must be that little."

THE BOAT landed in New York City and I bade farewell to my companions of the trip. Some of them would go to the North, others to the South, but most of them to the West. My destination would be the West, but first I must have some gold in my pockets—for with gold a man can do many things. I remained in New York City and worked in a factory. I hated the long hours, the small pay, and the fact that I could not breathe the fresh air of the country. As I heard my fellow workers speak English, I determined to master that tongue. You probably know that in addition to my mother tongue, German, I was later able to converse fluently in Spanish.

Russian, and French. But I was restless; I didn't like men to boss me. They say that I never lasted more than a week in one job in New York. My spare time was devoted to improving my knowledge and I bought many books, and studied them carefully. Sound knowledge is a valuable ally when you know you will eventually make enemies—which is the unfortunate lot of any man who feels he is riding the ship of Destiny. But I needed more gold.

So I took the money I had carefully saved and bought a small tavern. Men would come and drink in my place. And they talked much for liquor loosens the tongue. There was one sad man who came and drank. He did not drink very much, but he was one of those men whose constitutions cannot stand any alcohol at all; a single glass of wine would make him roaring drunk. His name was Edgar Allan Poe. I often wished I had been able to help him; but it probably would have done him no good, for he seemed to be a man doomed to misery.

Finally I sold my tavern and headed west to Missouri with some men from Switzerland and the various German principalities. It was a very nice land. The ground was rich and fruitful. Many Germans came there each year. They built their houses and tilled the fields. There were villages in which more German was spoken than English. I bought a house and tried my hand as a small farmer.

I was totally dissatisfied, for a man of Destiny needs adventure—and you couldn't find that with the plow. I could make a living as a farmer but I would never die rich; there must be another way to earn more money.

One of my friends spoke to me. "There is a fortune to be made in furs; you can buy furs from the Indians for a little and sell them at a great profit. You will have to go to Santa Fe first. Herr Sutter. But there are dangers along the way. They say the Indians raid the wagon trains and scalp the men; the women they take as squaws."

I went to St. Louis and there met many trappers and fur traders. Attentively I listened to their description of the business. Definitely I could make a lot of money with furs. Soon I was on my way to Santa Fe. When we camped at night some of the men would talk about a land where there was wealth for the asking.

"What is the name of this land?" I demanded.

"California," laughed one of the men.

"How do you get there?" I wanted to know.

This time they all laughed, and finally one of them explained the reason why. It was many miles to the West and the trip was an exceedingly dangerous one. Only a fool would want to go there when you could do so well in the fur trade.

That was my Destiny! California! At that moment I knew exactly where I was going to be, but not how to get there. So I returned to Missouri and sold my farm. Have you ever heard the words: *California, here I come.* I am the man who first uttered them.

Again westward I headed with a party and we finally reached a British trading post, Fort Vancouver. Then the people in my party told me they would all wait until winter was over before going on to California.

"Time is precious," I scolded them. "I came to set my feet in California and I won't delay."

But I found that no ship sailed directly from there to California.

THERE IS an old saying that where there is a will there is a way. I decided if I couldn't get to California by the shortest way, I would take the longest way. A ship was leaving for Honolulu and I booked passage at once; what was in my mind was to find

a ship leaving from Honolulu for California.

It was a good idea, anyway. To my dismay, when I arrived in Hawaii, I learned no ships sailed from there to California in the winter; they considered the ocean voyage to be dangerous and risky. So I spent my time learning about the people and the island. When they asked who I was, the time had come to be impressive.

"I am Captain John August Sutter and I served under his Majesty, Charles X of France."

How impressionable people can be! The very mention of a military title opened homes to me. As far as the people were concerned, I was a bachelor. But I made one important discovery which was to help me later in my vast plans: The natives of Hawaii were willing to work hard, if they liked you. And most important of all, they were faithful; I needed people who would be faithful to me.

FINALLY in May, 1838, a ship left for California. I was aboard that ship with several natives. One I called Marc, and he was to be my righthand man for many years. On July 2nd, we landed in California.

I must smile as I remember how impressed I was with Yerba Buena; today it is the site of San Francisco. There was an easy-going life there; the houses were small; people were small merchants. In the streets were Mexican soldiers, for at that time California was part of Mexico—and Mexico was independent of Spain.

What California needed was a man with imagination, a man who was capable of being strong when the situation so demanded it, a man who could organize and govern, and a man who would be famous. Now more than ever was I convinced that Captain John August Sutter was the person to fill those boots.

I wanted to study the surrounding country, so I purchased a horse and made trips. The soil was rich and fruitful and not exhausted as in old Europe. Here many farms could be built; in fact, a colony could be created.

That was it! So at once I returned to Yerba Buena and asked for quick appointment to see his Excellency, Governor Juan Batista Alvarado.

He was a busy man for there were uprisings in California that had to be put down. Some of the people were not satisfied with the way Mexico was administering California. My title of "Captain" came in handy. An audience was granted and he listened to my plans.

"It is my objective to create a colony here of hard-working men. Houses will be erected; fields will be cultivated—and of course there will be much trade."

I shall never forget that first meeting with Alvarado. He sat in his chair puffing on a big cigar, but all the time he was studying me. Was I a madman —or the man he needed for California?

"To do what you say would require wagons, animals, tools, and men willing to obey you. Where would you find all these? Surely not here."

"All four I can get from Hawaii."

"What will you call your colony?" he continued.

"New Helvetia," was my reply.

Alvarado came to a decision—namely, that I was the man for whom he had been looking for all these years. One to strengthen and give new blood to California. There were a few technical matters to be explained. I had to give up my citizenship and become a Mexican citizen; that was easy to do. Later I would be commissioned a Captain in the Mexican army; this was more to my likening.

"Go out and do some exploring. Be certain you have picked the ideal place for your colony. Then return to me and

I will draw up the papers giving you legal title to the land."

Marc and two other natives of Hawaii came with me on that trip. We put our supplies in a boat and traveled. The country was virgin in every respect. The eyes of Indians watched us on our trip, but they didn't bother us in any manner.

WHEN I RETURNED to Alvarado, he kept his word. To put it mildly, he gave me a choice and generous portion of California: Eleven square leagues of land along the Sacramento, American, and Feather rivers. Then I returned to the land. I selected the highest ground I could find convenient. Two grass houses were first built by my natives after the manner of the Sandwich Island houses. The frames were first made by the white men who also accompanied me; then the houses were covered with grass. Next I built an adobe one story, about forty feet long, one room, a blacksmith shop, one a kitchen, and one a room for myself. We worked fast to complete everything before the rains came in the autumn of 1839.

The winter following, we sowed wheat and cut timber. I had the white man teach the Indians how to use the saw and other tools. The redmen worked hard for me and I treated them fairly in every respect. My colony started to grow, as word spread throughout California and other places of what I was doing. Soon my name was on every man's tongue. I also established ranches on my property. At first I bought cattle from the Mexicans; then I purchased some from the Russians at Fort Ross.

Soon, each week people would arrive from the United States. Could I give them work and land? The answer was always, "Yes". It was soon necessary to have boats built, not only to bring my products to Yerba Buena but to all parts of the world.

As the years passed, I became wealthier and wealthier. But that also raised a problem, for there were envious eyes around me. So I built a fort and raised my private army. Cannons were purchased and mounted; I hired former German officers to train my soldiers. They consisted of men from Hawaii, Indians, Mexicans, and others.

Then, one day, two Russian officers came to me from Fort Ross. They would sell me land up to the sea. Since I had enough cash on hand, I bought it. At this time I sent for my wife and my children. There would be no need to explain things to others, for others did not ask me questions.

In 1842 Mexico sent a new governor to California, Manuel Micheltorena. I was conscious that Alvarado had outlived his usefulness to me; he was jealous now that I was the master. On the other hand, the people liked Alvarado. I sent a trusted messenger to Micheltorena, and told him my private army was at his disposal.

A battle took place and my troops were defeated; for the moment, Alvarado was the victor. Micheltorena had to leave, but he became my friend for life. Alvarado hated me, but money smoothed matters out a lot. I also decided to send a good portion of my fortune to bankers in England and Switzerland for safe keeping. Somehow I felt war would continue in one form or another.

My enterprises grew and a few years later, war broke out between Mexico and the United States. Fremont came a little ahead of time with a group of volunteers to free California from Mexican rule. I decided to remain neutral and Fremont became my close friend to the end of his life.

IN 1847, I DECIDED to build a sawmill with the latest equipment available. My foreman for these activities was John Marshall. I shall never forget the evening of January 24, 1848. There had been a heavy rain before sunset. I was alone in my large office room when John Marshall entered alone. He opened a small bag and threw some glittering objects on my table. "Gold," was all he said.

"Gold," I repeated as my heart beat furiously. I would test it later, but I knew then it was gold. Once the word spread, there would be hundreds of thousands to overrun my land. I would be smashed, all my work destroyed before my eyes. Unless? There was something I could do and it would work if this secret could be kept.

"If the United States Supreme Court affirms title to my land, we can use their troops to enforce my claims. In addition, I can swear in my private army to help keep away the hordes, unless they meet my terms.

"You will leave at once for Washington. I shall sell you a few acres of land; you will refuse to pay me and challenge my title. Since my titles are based on treaties with Mexico, the case will at once go to the Supreme Court of the United States. Public Opinion will be against you; they will even call you an ungrateful man—however, I doubt much publicity will be given to the case. My eldest son will oppose you, and he must not know about the gold. You both leave at the same time. I shall hire the finest lawyers to defend my case."

John Marshall looked at me for some time before he let the words pass his lips. "And you are willing to trust your entire future to me? I could betray you and destroy you."

"Before you leave you will have a document which gives you one third of my fortunes for your life. You will be the second richest man in the world. Satisfied?"

Work on the mill was stopped and the ground covered up. I decided to employ my men building more boats. Speed records were broken on the trip East. My son was puzzled that I showed no animosity towards Marshall. The case went at once to the Supreme Court of the United States. They upheld my claims to the land by a unanimous decision. I was also now a citizen of the United States due to the transfer of sovereignty over California.

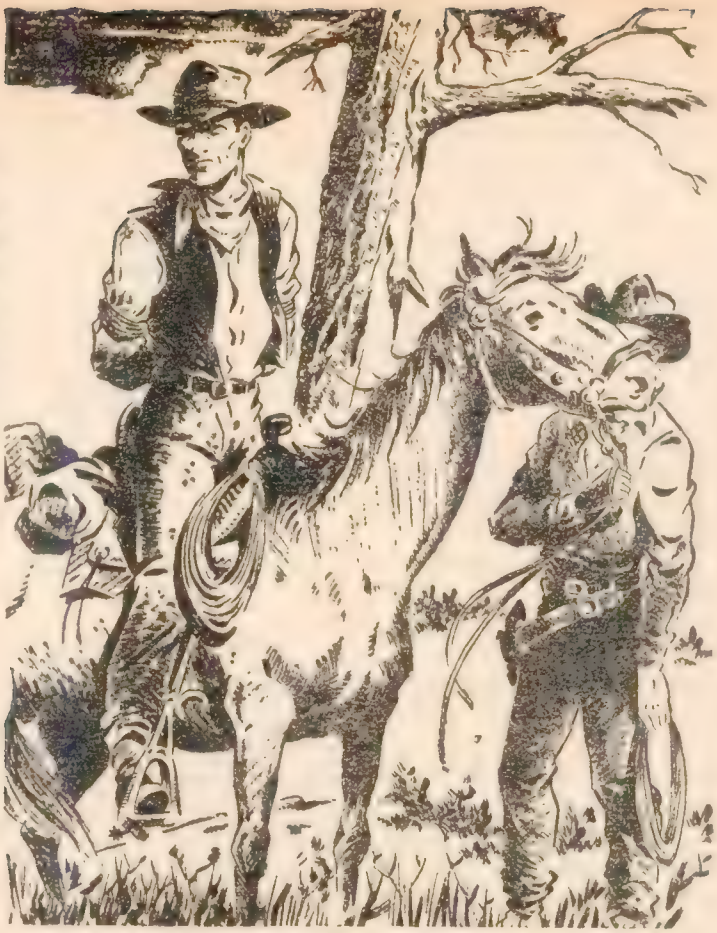
As soon as John Marshal returned, I made the dramatic announcement to the world. *Gold Discovered in California!* Men could come and work the land looking for minerals. They could purchase the land at a nominal price, but I was to get thirty per cent of all gold and other wealth taken from the land.

The rest is now part of History. There were those who dared to defy me. We used the troops under Fremont and my private army under the command of Marc to keep order. In addition, I had been commissioned a General in the State Militia. I saw to it that the state troops were exceedingly well paid.

My span of life is almost over. They call me the richest man in the World and John Marshall the second. I am happy for I was a Man of Destiny. But there are times when I shudder. IF I had done the wrong thing I would have ended my days in poverty.

Question: Where did the IF take place? (Answer is on page 98)

Cass Farrell had waited too long; now the price on his gun was going down, and he couldn't afford to turn down a job. Because, if he did, they'd just import a lower-priced killer!



by JIM BREWER

BOOTHILL BONDAGE

CASS FARRELL came awake at once, the gun, which was never out of his hands while he slept, aimed instinctively at the door. He slid quickly out of bed and hauled on his pants with one hand. The knock came again, muffled but peremptory.

It was near midnight; Cass could tell that from the positions of the stars he could see out of the shack's one window. He padded across the floor in his stockinged feet and flattened himself against the wall by the door. He slid the bar up and, gun aimed at the door, said, "Come in."

The door swung open and a man moved slowly into the shack and halted in the pool of light cast by the thin sliver of moon. Cass recognized the hawk-visaged face of Thornton Duff. He said, "All right."

The rancher came into the room and slowly felt his way through the darkness for the table. He found a candle, lighted it, and by the time he brought it back to the table Duff had found a seat. Cass stuck the candle into a tin pan on the table and stood watching the rancher, waiting for him to speak

though he knew the nature of his mission.

Duff smiled tentatively and when he got no response gestured peevishly at the gun hanging loosely in Farrell's hand. "Why don't you put that thing away! It makes me nervous."

Cass was standing with his back against a corner of the room. Involuntarily his eyes darted to the window then back to the rancher. "I feel better with it in my hand," he said suspiciously.

Duff masked an expression of contempt and looked sternly at Farrell. "I've got another job for you."

Cass considered the rancher. "How much?"

Duff ignored the question. "Jody Haslem. Next time he comes into town make sure he doesn't leave it alive!"

Cass wondered if he knew Jody Haslem and finally placed him as one of the homesteaders who had located on land that Duff considered his. He nodded and asked again, "How much?"

"When will these people learn that I won't let anybody steal my land?" the rancher asked, continuing to ignore Farrell's question. "I came to this valley when it belonged to the Indians, took my ranch and held it in spite of blizzards, droughts, savages, and outlaws. And now the ones who didn't have the guts to come out here and fight for the land are trying to steal it from me. But they're reckoning against Thornton Duff! I'm not going to let them get away with it."

Cass waited until the rancher had ceased his tirade. He had heard the same thing each time Duff had come to his shack with a gun-job for him. It seemed as though the rancher had to justify the taking of a human life to gain his ends. "How much?" he asked again.

Duff studied him through narrowed eyes. After a moment, he said softly, "Eight hundred dollars."

CASS HAD been expecting it: the price was two hundred less than the earlier price the rancher had paid him for a killing and had been going down consecutively since the gunman had come here. This time, however, he wasn't going to let Duff cut his fee. "One thousand dollars," he said firmly.

The rancher shook his head. "It's too much," he said flatly. "Remember that you're running no risk. My marshal won't bother you, and I could outdraw and outshoot Haslem myself."

Cass looked at the rancher, anger swelling within him. This was Duff's stock answer to his arguments and the rancher refused to listen to reason. "Whether you like it or not," he snapped, "you're not a little tin god here in the valley any more. You can't do as you please and forget about the consequences. More people are coming here every day, and they don't like the way things are being handled. Seth Baker is your marshal, sure, but there's a lot of talk about organizing some vigilantes to enforce law that he seems to forget. I'm taking more of a chance with every job I do, and it should be worth more money."

Duff's face began to get red and Cass realized that he had said the wrong things to the rancher. Perhaps by guile he might have gotten his price from the man, but the truth had made Duff angry. He had gotten used to having people jump whenever he spoke and he refused to accept the fact that time and progress were depreciating his power. He got to his feet. "Eight hundred dollars," he said adamantly.

Cass stared at the rancher. The superciliousness of his manner infuriated the gunman. He wondered what it would be like to put a bullet through Duff's guts and watch him kick; but he knew that he couldn't afford to do so. And he also knew that he had to take the job at Duff's price. He nodded.

The rancher grinned mercilessly. He

drew an envelope from a coat pocket and tossed it onto the table. "You'll get the rest of it when you've done the job."

He moved to the door and put his hand on the bar. Cass blew out the candle and Duff opened the door and went out. Cass pushed the bar back into place, then took the envelope and moved to the window. He took out some bills and there was enough light to see that they totaled four hundred dollars. He stuffed the money into a pocket and lay down on the bunk.

The talk with Duff had left him disturbed and he lay staring into the the darkness. He had been wrong in agreeing to kill Jody Haslem for the reduced price, he knew. But he'd had no choice; if he hadn't accepted the rancher's figure, Duff would have imported someone else.

Cass irritably rolled over on his side. He had stayed too long in one place. Familiarity bred contempt, he knew, which was why Duff had dared to keep cutting his price. He should have moved on six months ago, while he was still a feared and mysterious figure to these people. He'd move on after this job, kill him a gunman to add to his stature...

After a time Cass fell asleep, but his rest was troubled. He tossed and turned and awoke in the morning irritable. He dressed and made his way to a lunch room, as was his custom, for breakfast. He sat at the counter, gave his order. and noticed the way his neighbors took him for granted, as though he were part of the fixtures.

THERE WAS a time, not too long ago, when the conversation stopped as he entered and two seats on either side of him remained empty while he ate. Today, however, a teamster sat on one side of him and a puncher on his left accidentally dug his elbow into Farrell's side while he carved his ham. The cowhand turned to grin an apology, but at the look on the gunman's face hurriedly and silently finished his meal and left.

After his breakfast Cass made his way leisurely toward the saloon where he spent most of his time. The swampers had finished cleaning by the time he arrived and only one barkeep was on duty. He was half-heartedly arranging bottles and he nodded at Farrell. Cass made his way to a corner table and sat down so the whole of the big room was before him. He leaned back in the chair, tilted his hat forward and watched the room through narrowed eyes.

After a time a man came in, spied Cass, and came toward his table. He sat down and said, "Morning, Cass."

Farrell grunted and the man smiled. "Another day in this one-horse burg," he said. "We ought to go some place where we can make some money."

Cass did not bother to answer. Frank King was a toady, and he was repeating words he had heard Cass say. He hung around Cass hoping some of the importance attached to the gunman might rub off on him.

"I hear Brasada Burns killed another man the other day," Frank said.

Cass looked at the man with interest. Brasada Burns was a young gunman who was fighting in the small war between cattlemen and sheepmen being waged in the next county. He was beginning to acquire a reputation, and from all reports Cass had heard about him was likely to become a gunman of note once he acquired some experience.

"That's his twelfth man," Frank continued, sensing Farrell's interest, "and they say his pay has been raised."

"Good for him," Cass said, trying to keep the jealous note out of his voice.

"You ought to take a ride over that way and show him how easy a real gunman could take him," King continued.

Cass smiled at his neighbor. He had always looked on Frank and every other toady with contempt, but now he saw that King had some good points. "No," he said modestly, "I wouldn't want to take advantage of the kid."

Frank ordered a round of drinks. and though Cass made it a policy not to drink more than one a day he condescended to have one this early. They had the drink; then some punchers came in and Frank, who was a house gambler, had to go to work. Cass watched the game from his seat for a while then sat absent-mindedly watching the door.

Though King's comment about Cass adding Brasada Burns to his list of victims had been said in idle conversation, Farrell knew that a victory over the young gunman would enhance his reputation considerably, and put new life into his failing career. He considered the idea with a peculiar fascination. He had seen Brasada Burns once, and the thought of drawing against the boy...

CASS WENT back to the lunchroom in the afternoon and when he came back to the saloon, someone had his seat. He moved toward the table he considered his angrily and his heart leaped as he recognized Jody Haslem. The homesteader was sitting at the table with two friends. A bottle stood in the center of the table and the three were laughing and talking. The talk died as Farrell came to a stop near them.

Haslem looked up and the moment he recognized Cass knew that he has usurped the gunman's chair. He jumped to his feet with an apologetic smile. He was a goodlooking boy and, though he hadn't seen them, Farrell knew he had a wife and two children. "I'm sorry," Jody said; "I guess this is your chair. We'll move to another table."

Cass knew that this was as good an excuse to do his job as he could want. "I don't take kindly to anyone stealing my chair," he said, ominously.

Jody moved toward him. "Forget it," he said, the smile widening. "This is my lucky day. I sold a string of half-broke mustangs and I'm out to celebrate; let me buy you a drink."

Cass looked at Haslem with cold eyes. He noted how Jody wore his gun, low so he could pull it on the upswing, and how slim and capable his hands looked. He could have brought the argument to a head and forced the duel, but he didn't. He nodded and said, "All right," in an expressionless voice.

Haslem and his companions moved to another table and Cass sat down in his chair. Presently a drink was set before him and he sat toying with it, watching Haslem's group from the corner of his eyes.

They had forgotten him and were laughing and talking about something else. But he hadn't forgotten. He shouldn't have given Jody a chance to talk; he should have forced him to draw and killed him.

The raw liquor burned his throat and warmed his stomach. To hell with this existence, he thought. Tomorrow he would ride out of this god-forsaken town. He'd go to the next county, kill Brasada and then go to one of the big places and live high, wide, and handsome. He was Cass Farrell. Why was he wasting his time here? He was meant for better things.

Through the afternoon he kept watching Haslem. The homesteader was drinking far too much. Twice he treated the crowd and each time the drink was placed before him Cass picked it up and when no one was looking poured the whiskey through a knothole in the floor. Evening came and one of the barkeeps lighted the kerosene lamps.

Cass watched the yellow light flood the barroom and suddenly he was very sick of his existence. All day long he'd

sat in the corner and no one had paid any attention to him. It was as though he were a piece of furniture. When he'd first come here they'd been conscious of him all the time, but now they were used to him and ignored him.

But he was the same Cass Farrell and he would show these people that he should still be feared and respected. He saw that Jody Haslem had imbibed far too much. The homesteader was laughing and talking drunkenly with his friends.

Cass slid back his chair and got to his feet. He moved silently toward Haslem's table, like some grim shadow. He stopped with his eyes on Haslem, and the others at the table sensing something amiss turned to look at him. Haslem, seeing their attention, followed their gaze to Farrell. "Hi pardner," he grinned, "want another drink?"

CASS DID not change the expression on his face. "You sat in my chair." The words quietly spoken became loud as the attention of everyone in the big room turned to him.

"You still harping about that chair!" Haslem said irritably.

Cass started as though insulted, then assumed a half-crouch.

The homesteader recognized Farrell's intent and lurched drunkenly to his feet. "You tryin' to egg me into a duel, gunman?"

"Jody!" Two of his friends tried to come between the homesteader and Cass but Haslem pushed them away and staggered away from the table. The men sensing that a duel was inevitable moved away, leaving Jody to face Farrell.

The homesteader sneered. "Gunman! Think everyone's scared of you. Well I ain't and I can beat you to the draw! You're nothin' but a no-good yellar-bellied coward!"

Farrell's face flamed at the insult. "Go ahead and draw," he said.

Haslem blinked at Cass another moment then reached for his gun. But his movement was slowed by drink and as Farrell's gun came up in a swift, sure movement he hadn't even cleared leather. The gunman fired, taking Haslem in the middle and slamming him backward to the floor. The homesteader's face contorted in pain and he squirmed. Farrell's mouth twisted horribly and he fired again and again. The bullets hammered the body to the floor and even though he knew that Haslem was dead Cass continued triggering until his gun was empty.

Smoking pistol still in his hand, Cass looked about. Now they'd remember that he was a man to be respected and feared; now they'd remember not to treat him as though he were a part of the background.

But they weren't reacting as he had expected. He didn't see the fear and awe and respect in the faces around him. Instead there was something ominous in the way they stared at him, as though he were some mad dog who had to be put away. He could almost feel the movement as they started slowly toward him.

Cass brought up the pistol to protect himself and then he remembered that it was empty. The crowd seemed to remember it too and the movement toward him became more pronounced. Cass looked at the condemning faces and he felt a cold fear. He began to back away.

The batwings burst open and an oldish man with a marshal's star on his vest came in. His eyes took in the scene and he said, "I heard shooting, what happened?"

Two or three onlookers began to tell him, but he ignored them and pushed through the crowd to Farrell. "You tell me, Cass."

Cass told him that he and Haslem had quarreled and the homesteader had gone for his gun. He'd had to shoot in self-defense.

"Is that right?" the lawman asked the crowd.

Some nodded and started to tell him that Haslem had been drunk and Cass cold sober, but the marshal interrupted them. "Clear case of self-defense. Go on home, Cass."

Farrell bared his teeth in a grin. As Duff had said, his marshal would protect the gunman. Nevertheless, he made his way quickly through the muttering crowd. Once outside in the darkness he felt better. But he lost no time in making his way home and throwing the bar across the door of his shack.

HE DIDN'T light the candle but lay down on the bunk fully dressed and stared thoughfully into the darkness. It was becoming increasingly more dangerous to do a killing. The temper of the crowd tonight, though he had been anticipating a reaction of some kind, surprised him. If he were to stay here...again he toyed with the idea of moving on but he knew he wouldn't do so. He had better let this killing blow over for some time before he tried another. And the risk was certainly much greater than it had been.

After a time his nerves quieted and he fell asleep. He came awake to an imperative knocking at the door. Gun in hand he moved to the door and asked, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Frank King!"

Farrell's brow wrinkled in puzzlement. What could the toady want at this hour? "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Hurry up! Open the door!"

Cass was suspicious, but he knew the toady didn't have the guts to try anything. He slipped the bar and let the door swing open. King stuck his head into the doorway.

"I'm taking a chance coming here," he said hurriedly, "but I had to warn you. Get out of here fast! The boys didn't like your killing Jody Haslem and they're forming a vigilante committee to make an example of you!"

Fear gripped Cass. He had known something like this would happen eventually but he hadn't figured on it so soon. Without pausing to take his belongings he ran through the door and toward the livery.

The streets were ominously quiet and the silence added more terror to his mind. He knew how swiftly and mercilessly vigilantes dispensed justice. He would be asked no questins. A rope would be placed around his neck, he would be mounted on a horse, and the mustang would be whipped from under him...

The stable was deserted and there was no sign of the hostler. Cass hurried into the stall where his mustang was kept and threw his saddle on the animal. His hands were trembling as he fumbled with the straps, and it seemed an eternity before the horse was saddled and he was leading it out of the barn. Outside he paused and glanced back along the street toward his shack.

A silent crowd of men had reached the dwelling, their faces grim in the light of the torches they carried. Two of the men went through the door and a moment later they reappeared, gesturing and talking excitedly.

Cass wasted no more time. He leaped atop the mustang and sank his spurs into the animal's flanks. The horse snorted and started along the street at a gallop.

"There he goes!" someone shouted, and there was a roar from the vigilantes. Guns exploded and bullets whined about Cass. He bent low over the neck of the mustang and tried to urge more speed from it.

For several terrifying moments he raced along the street with the bullets of the vigilantes snarling about him. Then he was out of the town and galloping into the prairie. He let the animal run for several minutes more, then slowed its pace.

He looked at the stars. It was nearly morning, and he knew he had to conserve the mustang's strength for the grueling day that was ahead of him. The vigilantes would be after him as soon as they could take the trail, and his only chance was to get out of the valley before they could catch him.

Accordingly, he ran the pony straight for the pass until dawn began to gray the eastern horizon. Then he came to a small stream. He rode the mustang into the water and followed the course of the waterway into a brush-choked section of malpais. Here he left the brook, taking care to ride along rocky terrain and angling in the general direction of the pass out of the valley.

THE SUN was a fiery ball just peering over the mountains when he halted atop a wooded ridge and dismounted to breathe his mount. He made himself a cigaret and surveyed his back trail.

A cloud of dust near the malpais told him that his attempt to throw them off his trace hadn't fooled the vigilantes. Using logic they had followed his general path, knowing he had to make the pass, and following him accordingly.

Terrified by the nearness of the vigilantes, Cass wanted to leap atop the mustang and race for the pass. But he forced himself to squat on his heels and consider his plight. By fleeing as he was tempted, he would only wear out his mount and be caught long before he reached his destination. He surveyed the country around him and a shrewd plan suggested itself.

The route he was following led in a winding manner through brush-choked and wooded badlands until it eventually reached the pass. The terrain was rocky and left little trail so that men riding hurriedly in chase might not stop to look for sign. If he left the pursuers following the badlands trail and cut through the brush to the open valley and rode directly for the pass, he might get enough of a lead before the vigilantes discovered his ruse to enable him plenty of time to make his destination ahead of his pursuers.

He reviewed the plan again and decided it was his best bet. He ground out the cigaret and led the mustang off the trail, being careful to eradicate all traceable sign. Then, mounting, he spurred through the brush taking a direct course to the open prairie. Limbs, branches, and thorns tore his clothes and slashed and whipped his face and hands. But he ignored the discomfort and rode doggedly onward and soon he was out of the badlands.

He urged the mustang into a gallop and headed for the cleft in the hills ahead of him. The sun was well into the sky now and it was midmorning. He recalled that he'd had no breakfast and realized he was hungry, but he comforted himself with the thought that he could get plenty to eat tomorrow when he would be safe.

After a time he slowed and looked behind him. There was no sign of the vigilantes which meant they had been taken in by his ruse. They had probably seen him by now, but by the time they made their way out of the badlands he would have plenty of lead on them. All he had to do now was travel steadily.

He rode onward and now he whistled a tune. He felt good. He was Cass Farrell, gunman, and the day a bunch of dumb vigilantes could catch him would be the day he lay on his deathbed. He would go on from here and become one of the greatest gunmen in the west. He felt confident.

IT WAS SOMETIME in the afternoon that he looked backward and saw the dust cloud made by the vigilantes far, far back on his trail. He

grinned. The boys knew they couldn't catch him but they were going to make sure he left the valley. Let them ride for nothing if they wanted. He was sick of the place. He was going to leave and never come back!

The sun sank slowly and it was almost dusk when he rode into the pass. The wind from the mountains was cold and he shivered, but he welcomed it because now he was safe. He made a bend in the narrow way and suddenly halted the mustang. Another rider was coming toward him and he stopped his horse. Farrell's heart leaped. It was Brasada Burns!

What was the gunman doing here? He knew instantly, having gone through the same experience himself dozens of times. The range war had ended and Burns was moving on to a more lucrative field.

Being very careful not to make a sudden move, Cass studied the boy. Here was an opportunity to kill the youth and add to his stature. Once the word got out that he had bested Brasada Burns he would be a gunman of importance.

He noted that Brasada was sizing him up and knew that the boy was thinking the same thoughts. But he knew that Burns was inexperienced, and possibly a little afraid of drawing against a killer of his reputation.

Like two statues they faced each other, and Cass worked on his nerve to make his draw. He saw the competent way Brasada's holster was thonged to his thigh and the careless way his hand lay on his leg near the weapon. He could imagine the blinding speed with which Burns could draw and fire the gun...

The light in the pass began to dim as the rays of the sinking sun began to fail. Cass was all ready to make his draw but somehow he couldn't quite start his hand toward the gun at his side. Once he made his move Brasada would have to draw and the boy was good...

The dusk continued to thicken and Cass continued to fight himself to draw. Then it was dark and he could see his opponent no longer. He stared into the murky blackness and terror seized him. Brasada was just ahead of him, just waiting for him to make a move so the boy could shoot him!

Cass began to tremble. He could stand it no longer. Careful to make as little sound as possible, he slid out of the saddle and ran back around the bend. Protected by a wall of the pass, he whistled to his horse. The mustang walked slowly back to him.

Cass grabbed the reins and listened. He could hear nothing; but he knew that Brasada was somewhere ahead, waiting. . .or possibly even moving silently toward him! He flung himself into the saddle, turned the mustang and spurred it—back, toward the vigilantes...

★

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There wasn't enough gold for two—but is there ever?

DEATH RIVER

by FRANCIS BATTLE

THE CLIMB up the sheer mesa wall was grueling under the torrid Arizona sun and Bret thought how easy it would be to slip his knife across the rope while his new pardner, Chuck, was climbing up. He wondered how he'd kill him after they had found the gold. Undoubtedly he would have to shoot Chuck, because the younger man was strong and fast and there would only be one chance to kill him. The big-shouldered man came puffing up to the ledge where Bret was waiting with their packs.

"Man! That's rugged work," Chuck said and passed a rag across his sunburned face. He rubbed his hands tenderly.

"A young tenderfoot like you needs seasoning. Whatever made you want to hunt gold?" Bret asked.

"Too lazy to work I guess. When you spoke to me in town, I decided the fresh air would be good for me—but I never figured I'd have to act like an eagle."

The older man grunted and looked upward. "Don't look so bad from here on. We'll follow this stream bed—it's the only way up to the mesa top. We can shoulder our packs."

"How come you're so sure there's gold up here?" Chuck asked and climbed into his straps.

The older man smiled and adjusted his faded broad-rimmed hat. "After every rain I pick up a few ounces in the wash. It's coming from the mesa, someplace."

They started to move, slowly and carefully because one misstep could be fatal. The packs were heavy and often threw them off-balance. The stream bed was a twisted series of vicious turns and leaps.

"This would be a damn bad place to get caught in a rain storm," Chuck said concerned. "The force of the water must be terrific."

"It would smash you up like you was made of lard," Bret told him. "It's the force that wears the soil away and carries the pebbles and gold down to the wash."

They continued up the steep bed, going slowly and making sure of their footing. Every forty-fifty feet Bret stopped and poked around in the dirt and rock.

It took them the best part of the morning to ascend to the top of the high bluff. They were over 900 feet above the Arizona waste lands. They took shelter in the shade and ate canned meat, dry biscuits and an orange apiece.

"I ain't seen no gold yet," Chuck said matter-of-factly. "What do we do now?"

"We'll follow the stream bed to its origin. The gold is here," Bret said confidently.

THEY STARTED again, without their packs this time. Bret noticed how carelessly Chuck inspected his side of the bed. It didn't matter; Chuck had served one of his purposes and after the hard digging, he would become expendable. They searched and dug for an hour. Then he saw it. *Gold!* A piece of dull-looking material

was embedded in the stream floor. Quickly Bret dug around it and extracted a nugget the size of an egg. He became so excited his hands trembled. "Chuck! Hey Chuck. Come 'er quick. I found it!"

Chuck came running as Bret began working on a second nugget. "Man, look at that stuff!" Chuck said breathlessly as he picked up the precious metal.

"I knew it! I knew it!" Bret shouted excitedly. "It's real!"

The second piece was smaller, but the size did not diminish their enthusiasm. They worked furiously, scooping up the soil. All afternoon under the merciless sun they dug on hands and knees until there were no more nuggets to be discovered. When twilight came, they rested, built a fire and ate side meat, biscuits and coffee.

"How much do you think we got?" Chuck asked as he viewed the pile of drab looking stones.

" 'Round 20-25 thousand dollars I'd judge," Bret answered.

"Shall we split it up now, if we're leaving in the morning?"

Bret shifted his eyes towards the other man. "Why? Don't you trust me?"

"It's not that. I'd just like to handle something that's all mine. Besides, if one of us slips or loses his share, then the other still has his."

"It don't make any difference," Bret said; "we can split it up now."

"Might as well."

Bret felt his cheeks grow hot. Chuck was being stubborn. With half the gold on him, there couldn't be any easy way to get rid of him.

After they divided the gold equally, they rolled up in their blankets. Bret sniffed the air. It smelt uneasy.

IN THE MORNING, they had a light breakfast and prepared for the descent. Their packs were almost empty but for the gold and a day's food for the trip back to the road where Bret had the wagon.

Bret told Chuck to take the lead and the first hundred feet he had all he could do to concentrate on his own footage. They rested for a while on a narrow ledge. Again Chuck took the lead.

Bret became nervous as they approached a five-foot gap in the stream bed. Here the surrounding rock had been eaten away considerably, forming a huge hole in the cliff wall. This would be it, Brett hought.

"We'll have to toss our packs across first," Chuck said and slipped out of his straps. He rubbed his shoulders carefully.

Bret didn't like Chuck having both packs on his side of the crevice at once. Reluctantly, he helped toss the packs across. When Chuck got ready for the jump, Bret placed his hand on his .44. As Chuck leaped, Bret fired, twice. He saw the impact of the bullets jerk the younger man around and he watched him fall and roll behind a rock. Bret moistened his lips and backed off for the jump. A movement from behind the rock caught his attention and he ducked just in time for a slug to miss his head and crease his hat. Bret quickly hid around the bend in the stream. He waited, listening to the silence. How badly was Chuck hurt? Was he dead now?

Bret's throat was so dry he ached. He removed his hat and placed it over his .44. Then he edged the hat around the rock. He was greeted by a slug ricocheting off the rock and scattering dust in his eyes. He swore.

"Chuck! I'll make a deal with you," he called out. "I can save your life for all the gold."

"No deal, sidewinder; I'll stay alive long enough to put a bullet in your belly!"

BRET WIPED his face with the back of his shirt sleeve. He replaced

his .44 and cursed himself for shooting carelessly. Suddenly he jerked his head towards the sky. The glaring sun was slowly growing dim. A chill shook his body. In his anxiety this morning he'd forgotten to check over the waste lands for the ominous clouds that meant flash-flood and certain death. There was one chance; if they could move several of the large rocks to build a wall, they could divert the deadly plunge of water.

The rain started to come, like a thousand buckets.

"Chuck! I can save you. We'll split 50-50!"

The other man answered by spraying more dust with a ricocheting bullet. "We'll both die, you fool!" Bret cursed hysterically.

A mad laugh answered him from the other side.

Fear dug its cold fingers into Bret's throat and shook him uncontrollably. He moved around the bend. "Listen to me Chuck. I—"

A slug tore into his arm, spinning him in a circle. A blast of thunder shook the mesa as the rain poured harder. Bret grabbed his gun and crawled up the stream bed, holding his bleeding arm close to him. Thirty yards up and another turn gave him the advantage of seeing Chuck hiding behind the rock. Bret called out, "Hey Chuck!"

When the younger man raised his head to see where the voice was coming from, Bret carefully placed two more slugs into Chuck's body. Then he heard it, the hollow rumbling above him as the torrent of water began, and he could feel it, taste it—the bitterness of inevitable death.

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WESTERN ACTION

Melinda intended to show Donovan Brent that she could be useful!

THE RESOURCEFUL WEEK OF LITTLE SILLY

by A. P. HURT

THE PRAIRIE moon rose high, adding its soft radiance to the flames of the campfire, around which the members of the wagon train were gathered. From a group of plainsmen rose a soft, plaintive melody. Melinda Travis, fresh from a young ladies' school in St. Louis and en route to Santa Fe to join her father, stole a glance at one of the singers, Donovan Brent, a young, dark, serious man.

Only his presence had made the long, wearisome journey bearable. But Melinda was beginning to despair that theirs would ever become more than a casual acquaintance, especially now that they were but one week's travel from their destination. Once in Santa Fe, the members of the wagon train would scatter in four directions, Donovan among them. She might never see him again. The thought was devastating.

His indifference both hurt and piqued her. Hurt her because she was desperately in love with him; piqued her because never before had any man been so immune to her blandishments.

"Bed time, Linda," said Mollie Caswell, her companion. "We'd best be turning in."

Reluctant to leave, Linda rose slowly. If only the hours spent around the evening campfires were not so short, she thought. She stole a glance at Donovan. He was listening quietly to something another man was saying. He did not look up as she called a brief, "Good-night, everyone!" Feeling a hot ache behind her eyes, she turned toward the Pittsburgh wagon she shared with Mollie and Mollie's husband, spare, kindly Bick Caswell.

Bick was already making up his bed on the ground under the wagon. Linda followed Mollie inside the wagon and began to undress. The older woman was asleep almost at once, but Linda lay awake, listening to the night sounds and thinking of the handsome young man beside the campfire.

"I wonder what's wrong with me?" she wondered. Rising on one elbow, she drew a mirror from her portmanteau. The girl that gazed back at her in the moonlit, canvas-walled room was young and sweet-faced, with a fresh, unspoiled beauty as dewy as th

primroses that carpeted the prairie with a pink and white bloom. She had blue eyes, auburn hair, and a sprinkling of gold-dust freckles across her upturned nose.

"Baby-face," she whispered scornfully. "No wonder he never looks at you."

She slept finally, to awaken to the clamorous confusion attendant to the departure of the wagon train: the shouting of men in pursuit of mules and oxen, the rattle of yokes and harness, the clank of chains.

Hastily she rose, and throwing a robe of scarlet velvet about her slim form, she gathered up soap and towels and left the Pittsburgh to dash across the open toward a ravine,. There a small stream, sheltered by green-brier, trickled along. Glancing about to make sure of her privacy, she disrobed and stepped cautiously into the clear, cold water.

She was soaping her white skin when she heard a stir in the brush. Panic-stricken, she stood poised, the dancing leaves above dapling her body with tender patches of shadow. Then she saw a leering, bearded face peering at her and she recognized a rough bullwhacker by the name of Bruz Ott. Terrified, she began to edge toward the farther bank of the stream.

There came a loud crackling in the brush, and then she saw a fist appear out of nowhere. It cracked dully against Ott's skull. He groaned, tottered, and was dragged away by a tall figure in a linsey coat. She knew the coat well. It belonged to Donovan Brent.

Face flaming, Linda dried hastily and dressed. She found Mollie and Bick waiting breakfast for her when she returned to camp. Too perturbed by the incident to more than pick at her food, she decided to say nothing about it to them.

THAT DAY'S journey under the broiling June sun was uneventful. It was not until evening, when the caravan was camped within sight of Rabbit-ear Mounds, that Linda saw Donovan again. The wagons had been formed into the usual rectangle and the animals turned loose to graze, when he appeared with wood for the nightly campfire.

Heart pounding, she went to him.

"I—I want to thank you for what you did this morning."

Hid dark eyes, steady and quiet, met hers. For a moment he said nothing, but Linda saw the color rise under his tan. He said, "It was nothing. Any gentleman would have done the same. The jaspar won't both you again." As though dismissing her, he turned his back and began to pile the wood on the ground.

Chilled in spite of herself, Linda stood watching him. All day she had hugged to her heart the thought of his kindness. She had endowed it with something special, something personal. Now she knew he would have done the same for any woman.

Did he, she wondered, have a sweetheart, somewhere out in the Territory? Almost she dared asked him. But the straightness of his back turned toward her sapped her courage.

It was hours later, when the campfire burned low and the dancing shadows grew dim against canvas walls that she stole away from Mollie's side to wander beyond the camp, where the prairie moon beckoned with fingers of silvery light.

Standing with her forlorn, tear-wet face lifted to the heavens' she heard the sound of footsteps. Then Donovan, looking grim and forbidding in the moonlight, joined her.

"What are you doing out here?" His voice was rough. "Don't you know it isn't safe?"

"I like it out here," she said, angered by his tone. "And I am not afraid."

His eyes glinted angrily. "Well!" he snapped. "That's just dandy. I suppose

we can risk an encounter with the Comanches—just so you can enjoy the moonlight!"

"I'll do as I please!" she snapped back. With a toss of her head she strode on, farther away from the wagons. For a moment there was no sound behind her, then she heard his swift steps. She began to run, her full, scarlet robe ballooning behind her. On and on, she ran, until her breath was short and her heart threatened to burst through her breast. But she was not as fast as he. He caught up with her in long-legged, galloping strides.

She felt his hands on her shoulders, then she was spun about.

Shaking her like a child, he gritted, "You little fool! Have you taken leave of your senses?" He shook her again, hard, joltingly.

She gazed up at him out of wide, startled blue eyes through which the tears began to flow.

His fingers loosened their hold a little. Horror filled his eyes as he realized what he had done.

"I'm—I'm sorry," he said. "But you've never seen a woman scalped, have you?"

She went limp in his arms, her lips half-parted and raised provocatively to his. For a moment he hesitated, then his face came down to hers and he kissed her with almost reckless abandon.

Linda felt her knees turn to water, so that she almost fell when he released her.

"I'm sorry," he said again, stiffly. His face was paper white beneath its tan. "I didn't mean to do that either."

"Sorry!" Stupefied, she stared at him. She felt a surge of rage. His apology was an insult to the way in which she had returned his kisses. Almost without volition, she struck out, her huge ruby ring gouging a long, angry line down his cheek. A trickle of blood appeared.

HE SAID nothing as he dabbed his cheek with his handkerchief. Tears smarted against Linda's eyes. With a little cry of remorse, she reached up and put her arms around his neck.

"I—I didn't mean to hurt you," she whimpered. "I..." Her arms fell away when she realized that there was no yielding in his tense body.

"It is time to go back," he said quietly, turning away.

"Donovan...." Her voice faltered.

"Yes?" He halted, waited for her to join him.

"Donovan—are you married?" The words were said in spite of herself, and her lips quivered.

He touched her hair gently, one brown finger lifting a curl from where it nestled against her forehead.

"No, nor engaged either. But...." He sighed.

Something caught in her throat. "Then why—why...?"

"Look," he said gruffly. "I hadn't meant to fall in love with you." There was a tight white line around his mouth. He lifted her hands, held them within his own. Turning the palms up, he ran a finger over their smooth surfaces. They were pretty hands, soft and white, with slim fingers and rosy nails.

"Linda, there's no place in my life for a girl like you. A girl who's been cherished and sheltered all her life. There can't be." He bent to kiss the top of her head. "I'm just a plainsman, a rancher. Every penny I have has gone into the purchase of a ranch in the Vallecito country, west of Santa Fe. I won't even have a house on the place for years, just a dugout—a room scooped out of the hills."

"A dugout with you would be a palace," she whispered.

"Little silly...." he said softly. "You don't know what you're talking about. You—with your ruby rings and velvet robes, your hired companions and fancy schools." He shook his head.

Face stony, she stared at him.

"Why, Linda, it's sixty miles to the nearest neighbor! There'd be days, maybe weeks, when I'd be gone and you would be alone. Left to your own resources, a delicate little thing like you couldn't survive in such a harsh country. A good example is your running off into the night like this, exposing yourself to an attack by the Indians."

"My father is wealthy," she began. "He...."

She knew the words were a mistake the moment she uttered them. He stiffened again and the face he turned toward her was cold and stern.

"I'm a man who stands on his own two feet!" His voice was as cold as his face. "I know your father—John Travis. They call him the territorial merchant prince. I've seen your home in Santa Fe. It's as luxurious as any in St. Louis."

"You don't think I've much backbone, do you?" she asked bitterly. "I love you, Donovan. And I can cook and sew. They taught me that at school." She proffered her talents eagerly. "I'd—I'd try very hard."

His face softened and his rare smile, warm and tender, curved his lips. "Yes, I'm sure you would. But wait—wait until you're worn and weary from washing and cooking and taking your turn at the roundup when I am short of help. Wait until the snows come and you're cooped up in one room for weeks on end, sharing quarters with half-frozen calves. Wait until those pretty hands grow callused....You'd hate me then, Melinda."

"I—I hate you now," she said tonelessly. "You're deliberately painting the blackest picture possible. You don't want me. Not really. You're just a selfish, inhuman b-beast!" She paused to dash away her tears. "Well, I wouldn't marry you now if you got down on your knees and begged me to."

Whirling, she dashed back to her wagon. There she flung herself down beside the sleeping Mollie and wept until the jagged pain in her breast lost some of its sharpness.

SHE ROSE early, dressed, and borrowing an apron from Mollie, she strode purposefully down to where the other women were preparing breakfast.

"I'll show Donovan Brent that I can be useful, too," she thought stormily.

He passed by while she was manfully attempting to push a huge, steaming pot of buffalo meat off the grate. Glancing up at him from beneath her lashes, she thought she detected a smile of amusement on his face. Angrily, she jerked at the pot, almost upsetting it. Hot, burning gravy splashed on her hands. Biting back tears of pain, she began ladling savory meat into the plates the other women were passing to her. She did not fill one for herself.

After breakfast the wagon train got under way. Toward evening a lone rider was seen approaching the caravan. His unusual equipment and costume proclaimed him a *ciboleró*, or buffalo hunter. As was not unusual, he motioned the wagon train to stop. Like many of the other *ciboleros*, he roamed the prairies, furnishing the wagon trains with fresh supplies of buffalo beef and bread, stored at his camp in some strategic spot.

Linda, whose wagon was next to that of Asa Wells', the captain, heard the men dickering. While negotiations were under way to replenish the train's dwindling supplies, the *ciboleró*—his name was Cerefino Lopex—kept glancing about.

Finally he said to Wells, "I have greetings for Miss Melinda Travis from her father in Santa Fe. Is she on this train?"

Before Bick could stop her, Linda jumped down from her wagon and joined Lopez. "I am Melinda Travis," she said eagerly.

"Your father said to tell you that he

awaits your coming with great pleasure." The man's black eyes swept over her figure in bold admiration.

Bick reached down and pulled Linda back up into the wagon. "I doubt very much that he ever even talked to your father," he growled. "Probably read about your coming in the *New Mexican*!"

Lopez left, to return several hours later with a dark-skinned, heavy-browed companion, Pedro Perea, and the provisions Wells had ordered. The two men lingered a while, joining the others around the evening campfire.

Linda, sitting beside Mollie and Bick, grew uncomfortable under their bold, steady stares. Bick noted her discomfort. He asked her to return to the wagon.

"I don't like the way they look at you," he said.

Linda rose obediently, but just then Donovan appeared, and she waited a moment, hoping for a glance from him. Just to see him there, staring at the flames, sent a stab of anguish through her. He looked up, and for a brief moment she glimpsed the misery in his eyes. Then he looked away and it was as though a door closed between them. Chilled and heartsick, she went to the wagon and undressed. She lay wakeful a long time, feeling the living, wishful dark around her.

She slept finally, to awaken, half-dazed, to hear soft stirrings close to the wagon. Thinking it was Mollie or Bick, she closed her eyes. She dozed, then awakened again to the nightmarish experience of feeling alien hands clapped over her mouth. Her terrified screams died in her throat. Struggling and kicking, she fought the ropes that were binding her wrists and ankles. Then she felt herself lifted and borne stealthily away, beyond the camp.

EVERYTHING had been done so quietly, that Linda was far from the wagon train encampment before she learned who her captors were. Riding double with her on a big roan was Cerefino Lopez. Accompanying them on two other horses were Pedro Perea and the bearded man who had spied on her when she was bathing, Bruz Ott. The knowledge of their identity added to her terror.

Heart almost failing, she remembered the horror tales of other abductions. Tears rolled down her cheeks and wet the gag they had placed in her mouth.

As the moon rose high, the men doubled on their tracks, then rode upstream for a few miles. Inexperienced though she was, Linda knew they hoped thus to throw any pursuers off their trail. Frozen in an agony of suspense, she sat quiet. She must, she thought, leave some clue behind. The bandits had thrown her scarlet robe around her, for the night was chill and her gown insufficiently warm. Although her hands were tied, she began to work loose the braided velvet ribbons that belted her robe. The task was slow and difficult, but she had the satisfaction of knowing that the belt with its heavy silver buckle fell away and dropped to the ground.

The ride consumed the night. Jolted almost insensible, Linda felt herself being lifted from the horse. Then Lopez carried her up a coulee to a rude dugout, scooped out of the hillside and thatched with concealing cedar bows.

Inside the cellar-like room with its dirt floor, she was unbound and tossed on a bunk. Left alone, then, she gazed about. There were, she saw, a firepit, a few rusty pots and pans of iron, a rough table, and two bunks.

The soreness and weariness of her body prohibited any activity. She lay quiet for a long time, conserving her strength and trying to plan some way out of her predicament. She must have drifted off to sleep, for she awakened

to the sound of the plank door opening. Bruz Ott entered and leaned over her, his almost lipless mouth bared in a grin that revealed yellowed, rotting teeth. He would have put his hands on her, but Linda drew back, her own hands gripped into claws.

Just then Lopez entered and motioned the other man outside.

"See to the horses, *amigo!*" he said sharply. To Linda, he said, "I 'ave brought you food. You eat, *si?*" From a buffalo hide bag he brought forth coarse bread and dried buffalo beef.

Hungry though she was, she scorned to eat before him. He watched her a moment, then, shrugging, he left, closing the door behind him.

Like a flash Linda was at the door. To her relief she discovered that he had left it unbarred. Then the significance of that caused her to tremble. He'd left it unbarred because he was certain that there was no chance of her escaping, or of being discovered! The thought robbed her of her appetite. She scarcely touched the food and water Lopez had left.

Opening the door, she gazed out into the afternoon's fading light. She took a timid step or two beyond the dugout, only to return when the rocky soil cut her bare feet. She must, she thought, glancing around the dim room, find something with which to cover her feet. Her eyes fell on the buffalo hide bag in which Lopez had brought her food. She seized it and, using her nails, her teeth, and a jagged piece of glass she found in the firepit, she laboriously cut two squares of leather from the bag. These, together with some strips of leather, she fashioned into crude mocassins.

SHE SPENT a lonely, fearful and sleepless night. At daybreak she was up. After eating a little food, she went outside. From the top of the hillside above the dugout, she had a clear view of the surrounding country. Her heart almost failed again, for as far as she could see, there was nothing but space —vast, empty space, covered with clumps of sage-brush and other shrubs. Nowhere was there any sign of early morning campfires or wagon trails.

Heartsick, she went back to the dugout and gave vent to her fear and despair. After a long time still shaken and sobbing, she began to scold herself. There was no use in spending her energy in weeping. Strengthened, she ventured outside again, farther away this time, marking her path with broken twigs she tore from the shrubs. From a still higher hill she scanned the landscape. There was no sign of other human creatures.

Almost angrily she tore one sleeve from her scarlet robe and thrust it aloft on top of a long branch of sage-brush. Perhaps, she thought, someone would see it and be led to her hiding place.

Of course, she reminded herself, Bick and Mollie would have sounded the alarm as soon as her absence was noted. Undoubtedly Bick would suspect the two *ciboleros*. As for Bruz, his absence, like hers, was bound to attract attention.

Disturbingly came the thought that Donovan himself might block an early rescue. Suppose he told the others of her foolhardy stroll out into the moonlight? Precious time could be lost in a fruitless search of the low hills surrounding the wagon train encampment.

The day passed. Then another. Linda spent most of her waking hours on top of the hill, beside her improvised signal. The sun blistered the tip of her nose and turned her cheeks to brown satin. Toward evening of the sixth day, when she was beginning to lose all hope, she saw two riders approaching. Her heart began hammering crazily, and almost hysterical with relief, she watched their figures loom closer. Then she recognized the horses as those belonging to Lopez and Bruz Ott. Her

disappointment was so great that she almost fainted.

Then came an idea, one that filled her with hope again. She would hide in the shrubbery, and when the men had dismounted and gone inside the dugout, she would slip down and steal away on one of the horses. Surely she could follow their trail back to their camp, which she knew to be close to the Santa Fe trail. Hurriedly pulling down her signal, she crouched quietly behind a clump of sagebrush. Her spirits were soaring now, and she felt the heady thrill of freedom. But her scarlet robe must have betrayed her, for instead of dismounting, Lopez bore down upon her. She started to run, but she was no match for the big roan. Lopez reached down and scooped her up into the saddle beside him. With his arm tight around her, he rode back to the dugout.

Inside the crude shelter he threw her, kicking and biting, into the bunk.

"You'll pay for this, you.... you...." She broke off, her tongue positively paralyzed with fury.

"It is your father who will pay, *querida*," he said. "Many *pesos*. Already my friend Pedro should have contacted him in Santa Fe."

His words threw her into momentary panic. It would be at least another week before help from Santa Fe could be expected. Meanwhile....Her teeth began to chatter as she gazed into those bold and admiring black eyes.

"You are cold? Then Cerefino will warm you." He stood over her. She felt his arm slide around her waist, felt his hot breath on her lips.

With a little cry she lifted the hand which bore the ruby ring and raked it down his cheek. The prongs tore his flesh and blood spurted and ran.

Cursing, he threw her back against the bunk and attempted to stem the flow of blood. Linda's eyes darted about, seeking a weapon. His fowling piece stood in one corner, by the door. A swift move, and she had it in her fingers.

"Get your hands up!" Her voice was strong and cold, but inside she had gone all soft, like jelly. She had never handled a gun before, and she knew nothing of its mechanism.

Lopez' expression told her she made a ludicrous figure, but she had the satisfaction of seeing him reach for the ceiling. She saw something else: that he was tense and ready to spring.

LOOKING into his evil face, she knew that it was either Lopez or herself. As for Bruz—she'd have to take care of him later. Her eyes wandered momentarily toward the gun in her hands, seeking the means of firing it. That was all Lopez needed. He was upon her instantly, his powerful fingers closing over her throat. The last thing she remembered was the sound of the gun hitting the floor.

She regained full consciousness to hear the grunts and groans of men locked in mortal combat. Through the thick dust churned up by their scuffling feet, she recognised the second figure as that of Donovan Brent.

"Donovan..." she whispered, rubbing her head dizzily. "Oh, darling..."

Eyes glazed to unwinking, she stared at those snarling, weaving figures. Lopez, arms driving, smashed a heavy blow on Donovan's head. He staggered, to come back with mauling fists that battered the other's face to a pulp.

Exultant, Linda watched. Then she saw a spasm of agony contort Donovan's face as Lopez' thumbs gouged cruelly into his eyes. Donovan loosened his grip to clap his hands to his streaming eyes. Before he could regain his lost advantage, Lopez was upon him again.

Waiting to see no more, Linda grabbed up an iron skillet from the floor and, heaving it high, crashed it against the *cibolero's* skull. He went down without a sound.

Donovan blinked the mist from his eyes and turned toward her. She threw herself into his arms, crying with love and relief.

"It's all right, little darling," he said softly. "Everything's all right now."

"Oh, Donovan—I thought I'd never see you again!" She was sobbing unrestrainedly.

"Thank heaven I found you," he said huskily. "I—I almost gave up hope. Then I found this...." From his pocket he pulled the velvet ribbon belt with its buckle. "If it hadn't been for the belt—and your signal on top of the hill—I'd never have found you." He held her close to his breast. "I spotted the signal with a field glass, early this morning. We—Bick and Asa Wells and I—headed straight for it. As we came close, we saw it hauled down. Then we saw something else, Lopez and another man riding up the ravine. Asa gave me the fastest horse and I took out after them. You know the rest, darling."

Linda's wet eyes crinkled. Demurely, she said, "Maybe I was a bit resourceful after all!"

Penitently, he gazed down at her sunburned face, at the crude moccassins on her feet, at the crumpled robe with its missing sleeve and belt. He bent to kiss her. "Forgive me, little silly. I'll spend my life making it up to you."

She was suddenly shy before him, shy and palpitant with the rapture of his kiss. She leaned her head against his shoulder, her cheek against his pounding heart. They stood thus for a long time, until the sound of horses' hoofs heralded the approach of Asa and Bick.

Donovan kissed her again, tenderly, lingeringly. "I must go help them truss up Bruz, and this jasper, too," he said, pointing a toe at the unconscious man on the floor. "But first I must ask you something—will you marry me?"

She had dreamed of proposals in the moonlight, with the scent of roses filling the air and a young knight in armor kneeling before her. But no moonlight, no scent of roses, no shining armor, could have added one whit to the joy of this moment.

Her lips parted to say "yes", but a girl can't very well talk when a man is kissing her hard upon the mouth.

★

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Special Feature

TOO MANY GUNS

by WADE HAMILTON

DICK LLOYD and Ed Mann were drunk—dead drunk. They staggered out of the saloon, and Mann gave Lloyd a playful push. Lloyd fell down. "Don't you hit me like thet, Ed," he growled.

He was a local cowboy, in town on a drunk; he had a mean temper when under the influence of alcohol. For two days he had been rip-roaring around, drinking and fighting and hollering. Now he got to his feet, weaving a little. Mann, also pretty well oiled, gave him another push; again Dick Lloyd kissed the hot Arizona dust.

"Pull your gun, Ed!" he snarled, reaching.

He shot from a prone position. He was fast with a short-gun; Mann went down as if he had been shot through the heart. Actually, he had been "creased" across the neck; he was only unconscious.

Dick Lloyd got slowly to his feet, brushing off his Sunday pants. "Sure got Ed," he mumbled. "Another dead man for my record. But me, I'd best get out of town, pronto, afore the marshall gets me."

He staggered to his bronc. He liked to ride through saloons, shooting as he rode in the front door and out the back. He was a Texan, and when he got soused he bragged about it. "Ride 'em, cowboy! Hook 'em, cow! Make room for a Texan, he's on the prowl!"

He had to get out of town. But first, he'd show this burg how tough a Texan was—these Arizonans were only scissorbills! He'd get some cartridges, but he wouldn't pay for them; he'd get them free!

He neckreined his bronc around, pulling his rifle out of scabbard. Winchester in hand, he rode through the front door of the hardware store, intending to get some cartridges. He had just killed a man, and the Law would follow him; a man needed lots of ammunition if the Law cornered him out in the badlands. The pony crashed through the door and they were inside the hardware store.

A woman, buying a hoe, saw the raised Winchester. She screamed and ran out the back door, forgetting her purchase. The proprietor was mad, of course; he was no fool, though. He ducked behind the counter and, so hidden, he ran the length of it, darting into a side room with a bullet beating the door-jamb beside him. Then he was outside in the alley, running for the marshal.

Dick Lloyd and his bronc had the hardware store to themselves. The bronc got tangled up in some washtubs and kicked them flat. He bucked, and Dick did some shooting. Forgotten now were the boxes of ammunition he was going to get; the memory of them became submerged in the good fun he was having. He spurred his bucking bronc high in the neck in the best bronc-riding tradition. The horse stumbled, crashed into the counter, and upset it. Scales fell and the counter went on its side. The shock almost dumped the bronc on his head, but he held his footing.

Meanwhile, Dick Lloyd had been having himself a time. His Winchester whanged and spat lead. Down came a bucket from a hook; he shot out win-

dows; he sent a bullet through the scales, completely demolishing it. He ran out of cartridges in the Winchester so he shot it barrel-down into the saddle-holster and grabbed his sixshooter. Again, the bullets started.

DOWN THE street a few doors a bunch of outlaws were having a stiff poker game in *O'Neill's Saloon.* One of them, Curly Bill Brocius, looked up from his cards, scowling. He was a gunman, and a rustler, and everything else that a mother would not want her son to be. "What in the hell is all that noise? Somebody tie a washtub onto a hoss' tail, like tincannin' a dog?"

"Hosses don't shoot guns," another longrider said. "Play your cards, you lucky stiff."

The game had been going for two days. The rustlers had just driven up a big bunch of stolen stock out of Old Mexico and had sold the herd; now they were gambling among themselves. Curly Bill was a good gambler, a smooth one with the pasteboards, but he was slowly and surely losing to John Ringo and Joe Hill, two other rustlers. And this, coupled with the din from outside, made the curly-headed gunman angry.

"Who is doin' what to who?" he asked.

An onlooker said, "Dick Lloyd is drunk; he creased Ed Mann out in front of Mann's saloon. He's ridin' his bronc through the hardware store. He has that habit when he is stewed."

"He better not ride his bronc through here an' break up our poker game," Curly Bill said. He consulted his cards belligerently. "Too much for me; I pass."

Dick Lloyd wrecked the hardware store. The owner could not find the marshal; mayhap the lawman had decided to leave town to sit with a sick friend. Dick Lloyd rode out the back door, his bronc kicking himself out of the bottom panel. He was in an alley.

A fellow he knew was standing beside the back of a building. Dick looked owlishly at him. "Heck, I rode into that hardware store for some ca'tridges and done forgot them. Some of us Texicans sure has bad memories. You go in an' get me some ca'tridges, will you? Then I gotta be long gone for Texas. I kilt Ed Mann."

"Sure, Dick, I'll get you some bullets. You shore wrecked that dive, you did."

The man hastened into the hardware store. Dick Lloyd got busy on some fuzzy thinking. He was not riding the fastest horse in Arizona territoroy, and if the law took out after him he needed a fast horse, and a fresh horse. Therefore, he headed for the town corral.

THE CORRAL was back of the salook wherein the outlaws had their poker game; it was managed by a fellow named Johnny Boyle. With much profanity and waving of his .45, Dick Lloyd directed Johnny Boyle to take the saddle off his tired bronc and saddle a fresh horse.

"Which one you want, Dick?"

"That sorrel over there—thet long-legged one. He could cover miles in a hurry back toward Texas. Throw my saddle on him, Boyle!"

"That's Joe Hill's horse. He's inside, in the poker game. You steal his bronc, and he'll pull his gun against you; he's a tough one."

"No tougher'n me."

So the hostler saddled the horse. By this time, the messenger had returned with handsful of cartridges. Dick Lloyd reloaded both his Winchester and his Colts. Then he swung into saddle, the sorrel frisky under his spurs. "I'm goin' ride through *O'Neill's Saloon,* shoot it up, then pull out of this jerk-water town for good!"

"Them outlaws—they'll get mad—They won't want their poker game busted up!"

But Dick Lloyd thought otherwise.

John Barleycorn's bad judgment persuaded him that he was tougher than the Curly Bill Brocius bunch. He rowled the sorrel through the doorway.

"What in the name of—?"

"That damned Dick Lloyd," the proprietor said. "Somebody oughta shoot him an' put him out of his misery!"

"Well," John Ringo said, looking at Curly Bill, "why not?"

Curly Bill could think of no reason for not shooting the cowpuncher; neither could any of the other poker players. Guns lifted and hammers fell and guns roared. Dick Lloyd took all the bullets. His bronc bucked him off, he slamed down on the floor, and the bronc reared, going out the door backwards.

"He was ridin' my hoss," Joe Hill said, holstering his gun.

The longriders returned to their poker game. The marshal came and looked at the corpse.

"Self-defense," the marshal said. He winked good-naturedly. "Be a coroner's inquest right now. Somebody tell me what happened?"

Joe Hill said, "What good would a jury be? You've already said we shot him in self-defense. I play this ace."

"That's right," the lawman said. "Self-defense. We bury him in the morning. Prob'ly from the church. You boys are invited."

Curly Bill looked up from his cards. "We'll be there; we'll go good his funeral expenses, and give the parson a few bucks."

Next morning, suffering from too much poker and hangovers, the longriders attended the funeral, even following the rough box out to boothill cemetery. Then they rode out of town. One man was very pensive for some reason.

"What you thinkin' about, Joe?"

"Them bullets must pack an awful wallop. One of them hit his saddlehorn and went right through it, rippin' it loose from the fork."

"He ran into too many guns," Curly Bill Brocius said.

★

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Was it the bitterness that followed war's end, or was it more than that?

BURN THE YANKEE!

by D. S. HALACY, JR.

CAPTAIN LAYNE CARTER reined his horse slowly up the pass, excitement growing in him, crowding out the weariness that had saturated his body the whole of the trip home. From the ridge he was riding to, he would be able to see the ranch, their ranch.

Lizbeth would be there, the wife he hadn't seen for years, ever since he had returned to the Cavalry at the start of the war.

It had been a sorry business of blood and death, and where was the victory? Unless in time the wound could be healed, and brother could once again speak to brother and families live in peace again. And yet, he knew how truly Lincoln had said it—that about the house divided not enduring.

Pulling the dusty cavalry hat from his head, he wiped at sweat with his bandana, feeling the hot California sun burning into him. It had been a long ride from the stage station in Yuma; perhaps he should have stayed with the coach all the way to Los Angeles, but he hadn't been able to resist buying the horse and heading out.

And now he was nearly home, the long black years behind him funneling down to end at the top of the pass he rode to. He was coming out into the daylight at last. "Regroup" the General had always said. It was the best advice. Kneeing the horse, the captain raised his voice in a triumphant yell as he swept over the top of the ridge.

The yell stopped as though cut off by a sabre slash, and he reined the horse savagely, fighting the black to a plunging stop. His throat, dry with the heat, was suddenly tight and hard and his eyes widened unbelievingly at the sight before him. The ranch he had come home to stretched before him, the acres of it blackened ruin, the buildings a charred pyre, marked by the solitary thrust of chimney he had laid himself.

His first thought was for his wife and he urged the horse on down the slope toward the still smoldering shambles, the acrid smell of burned hide in his nostrils. Where was Lizbeth? The prayer was silent, a mute appeal in his tortured brain. Had he come home to bury his wife, the way he had seen so many women buried; to reap that as the victor's reward?

Then he saw the makeshift tent huddled on the rise beyond what was left of the house. He shouted, spurring the horse now to a gallop, his cry cutting the still heat. And he was answered. A figure emerged from the tent, a woman, and he saw that it was his wife.

HER HAND came up in a wave of recognition but before she could speak, he swung down from the black and swept her into his arms. His lips crushed hers and his arms locked her to him as they stood swaying. For a long time they embraced, the captain's thoughts entirely on his wife, the wonderful unreality of holding her to him. But even that couldn't last forever and he held her at arms' length, his ques-

Before him was only blackened ruin...

tioning eyes sweeping the burned out ranch, turning finally back to her deep-set, worried eyes. There were tears as she told him.

"It happened yesterday, Layne," she whispered. "Just at dawn. What stock didn't burn they ran off. This—" she turned from him, her hand gesturing to the tent of blankets— "This is all I could save. The papers, a few pictures—"

"Who did it?" he asked. "Who burned us out, Lizbeth?" The horror in him was turning to anger, cold calculating anger that stiffened his body and contorted his face.

She saw that, felt his tone and the worry came back to her face. "I don't know," she said miserably; "I don't know who did it."

"By God," he swore, "I'll kill them— I'll kill them!" The hate in him built and swelled until he quivered. Then suddenly he sank to the ground before the tent, the tension draining from him like blood from a

stuck animal. It came to him who had done it. There were southern sympathizers out here, too.

"Why?" he asked. "Why did they do it?" In anguish he shut his eyes to the smoking blackness, tried to keep out the stench of burned flesh and hide. This wasn't the peace he had fought for, the homecoming that had sustained him across the bloodied mud of a dozen battles. The anger had spent itself, and again he felt the awful weariness that had rode with him from Missouri. But now there was more than weariness.

How long could a man fight, he wondered? Lizbeth's arms about him tried to shelter him, protect him, but the thought that he had failed was a bitter thing to face. The war had followed him home. Not dead with the men who fell to feed it, the war was still with him, because even in California there had been violent arguments that went to blows. Victory, the captain knew now, was a personal thing, and he hadn't won the war.

Tight-lipped, legs stiff with more than tiredness, he wandered about the ranch, averting the dead stock. Shuffling through the ashes that should have been the roof over his head, a spark of the grim anger flared anew. But it was only a spark. He was too sick of war, too weary of fighting to go on. Everything was gone, even the help.

It had started, Lizbeth told him, soon after he left. Two of the hands had left after telling her what they thought of "black-lovers". Old Saul the colored cook, had left after being warned by men from town. When the fire came, there had been only two men besides the foreman, and now all three of them were gone, telling her it wasn't their fight.

"Why didn't you write me?" he asked as they sat at the fire, eating meat and biscuit.

Her eyes were sad, her whole face drawn and unhappy, not the shining girl he had left. "You had trouble enough, Layne," she said softly, and of course she was right. It would have done no good to have that added to the things he saw and did in the fighting. He had a wonderful wife, there was that one thing he had left, and later they found comfort in their love, lying together not in the featherbed of the ranch house, but under a leanto of scorched blankets. Love, the captain thought, was the only thing that was constant.

IN THE MORNING they rode double into the pueblo of Los Angeles. The dusty streets, the mud-colored adobe buildings, it was all in sharp contrast to the cities of the east, still fresh in the captain's mind. They went first to the hotel, where he intended to take a room until they could decide what to do.

As he helped Lizbeth from the black he noticed the knot of seedy-looking men leaning about, heard the loud talk and laughter. But it wasn't until he heard the "damyankee" that he realized this was a welcoming party for him. There was nothing to do but go on as though he hadn't heard.

A big, bearded man leaned against the front of the hotel picking his teeth with a clasp-knife. He spoke harshly as the captain and Lizbeth stepped up onto the boardwalk.

"We don't take to that uniform, *Captain* Carter." he sneered as he said Captain. "Or don't you aim to dress like us common folk?" A titter went up from the crowd, egging the spokesman on.

"I *had* intended to dress like a rancher," the captain said. "I thought the war was over. Unfortunately some yellow-bellied snakes burned my ranch and everything I had; now get the hell out of my way."

The man's sneer changed to an angry snarl. Still holding the knife out, he spat deliberately at the captain's boots. "Reckon I ought to salute you, too?" he taunted. The crowd guffawed as the captain led Lizbeth inside and took a room.

"Layne," she said, holding to his arm. "Everybody's not like that. We'll make out somehow. Don't let—"

He pulled away stiffly.

"Don't worry about me, Lizbeth," he said. "I know we'll make out. I've got to go out for a while, attend to a few things."

"What things, Layne?" she demanded. "Darling, I won't have you risking your life—"

He kissed her to still the worried flow of words and then he smiled down at her.

"No heroics," he said. "I'm going to talk to the lawyer and I have to see Waggoner about some credit.

The fear left her face and she smiled up at him, the bright smile he had missed until now.

"Oh, Layne, it's so good to hear you say that. I was afraid you wouldn't want to go on." She smiled ruefully. "Wasn't that silly?"

He left her getting ready to bathe, and went down to the street. The gang of loafers had dispersed and he mounted the black and rode down the street to the feed store. Waggoner and he had been close friends before he had gone back to the army. Maybe he'd help. The land at the ranch was good grazing country. After the winter rains it would again fatten stock. In the meantime he would need cattle, and feed to get by on until they could build up again. He thought Waggoner would help him.

INSIDE the big barn-like structure he went to the corner that was enclosed in the wooden railing, speaking Waggoner's name. The man got to his feet, a ponderous man, grayer than the captain had remembered. The long mustaches drooped and the beard was neatly trimmed. Smiling, the captain put out his hand.

"Hello, Waggoner," he said, waiting for the man to recognize him and take his hands in a friendly greeting. "It's good to see you again."

"You're not welcome here, Captain Carter," Waggoner said, and the captain realized the look on the other's face wasn't puzzlement but a cold stare.

"I—" the captain was taken aback. Dropping his hand he stood trying to probe the man's face. "I don't know what you mean, Waggoner," he said. Could the merchant have something to do with the razing of the ranch? He shook that idea as quickly as it came to him, knowing it couldn't be.

"My son died at Shiloh, Captain," Waggoner said, his voice cold and tight. "Were you there?" It shocked the captain; he hadn't realized the youth had been old enough to go, and as he thought of it he knew young Waggoner should have still been in school.

"I'm truly sorry, sir," he said softly; "I hadn't known. Nor was I at that battle." He understood some of the grimness in the old man's face now, but still it seemed unfair that he should hold his grief against the captain.

"The war is over," he added, "I had hoped—"

"I repeat it, Captain," Waggoner said, "you are unwelcome here. Good day." He turned and walked heavily back to his desk.

Stunned, the captain walked from the place. It wasn't fair. If Waggoner had been younger, he would have gone himself; he might have riddled Layne Carter, might have run him through with a sabre. And yet, thinking of it, the captain could understand. Lizbeth would hate anyone who killed him. The war wasn't over, he told himself. Would it ever be?

As he mounted the horse again, a buggy pulled in to stop by him. A slen-

der man in a gray suit and small, eastern-looking hat smiled at him. His face was smooth, and there was a big ring on his left hand, matching a stickpin in his cravat.

"You are Captain Carter?" the man asked, and when the captain nodded, puzzled, the man's face sobered.

"I'm Giles Warren, sir," he said. "Allow me to extend my sympathies in your misfortune. A tragic mishap, Captain." He shook his head sadly, apparently deeply concerned over the loss.

"Thank you, Mr. Warren," the captain said, surprised at the stranger's interest. "It was a hard thing to take."

"Indeed it was," Warren said, lifting the reins. "If there is any way in which I can be of service, please let me know. We Californians owe each other that much!" He smiled and then drove off, the bay trotting smartly down the dusty street. The captain watched him from the saddle of the black. *I might call on you at that,* he thought. *Sooner than you think, Mr. Warren.* A new hope rose in him, countering part of the disappointment of the talk with Waggoner. He reined his horse toward the lawyer's office.

JEFF COREY, the lawyer, rose quickly, hand out eagerly to greet Carter. The wiry old man hadn't changed a bit, neat as befitted the ex-Army officer he was. Corey had befriended Carter when the captain had first come west. "Welcome, Layne," he said. "Welcome back from the wars."

In spite of his pleasure at seeing his old friend, the captain's eyes clouded at the words. "I seem to be still fighting it," he said bitterly as he gripped the lawyer's hand. "Have you seen my ranch, Jeff?"

"The scum!" the lawyer said, his eyes snapping. "The dirty blackguards. I know how you feel, Layne. Believe me I do. But don't let it break you. You're back now, Lizbeth isn't fighting it alone. Listen, son—"

"Words," the captain said coldly. "You're not talking to some eager youth, Jeff. I'm tired; I'm about spent." The captain sank in a straight-backed chair.

"All those years of dirty hell. Fighting for victory. Sure, I was lucky. I came out with a whole skin, and yesterday I found my spoils of war." He shook his head, realizing that his voice had raised as he spoke.

"I know, I know," Jeff Corey said, some of the edge gone from the enthusiasm now. "I wish there were something I could do to punish the guilty ones. But the best I could do would be to point at two dozen men and say the men you want are amongst them, Layne. And what would be the point? No proof, and you can't murder them."

"Can't I?" the captain asked. "It's easy to kill."

"No, you can't," the lawyer said; "it's not in you. All you can do is call it a battle lost, and go on to win the campaign. You're army enough, you know what it is. You're fighting." Some of the snap came back to his eyes. The snap that had made Corey an officer, too, back in the past. A past that had left him only the two sabers crossed above his desk and the limp that he managed to hide pretty well.

"Let me tell you what Waggoner said when I went to him about credit," the captain said, and he told the lawyer of the rebuff he had met. "I went in there thinking of him as my friend, almost forgetting that he was a southerner. Don't tell *me* the war is over, my friend."

"I was afraid it would be like that, after what happened to the boy," Cory said. He swore softly to himself. "I tell you, Layne, I thought it would kill the old man. Blood is strong. But he

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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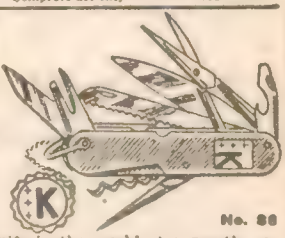

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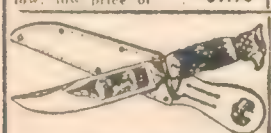

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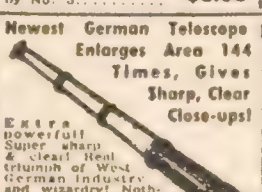

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isn't the only man here. There are others who—"

The captain snapped his fingers. thinking suddenly of the man in the buggy.

"Who is this Warren?" he asked. "Giles Warren, I believe he said. The man looked like something out of an office in Boston or New York. Offered to help me."

"He'll help you, Layne," Corey said. his face darkening. "He'll buy your place when you decide to sell. At his price."

THE CAPTAIN got to his feet. frowning. "What do you mean by that? He seemed—"

"Just what I said," Corey insisted. "He's no good. I wouldn't doubt that he stirred up these town bums who claim to be such good Southerners. He might have had your place burned. himself." The lawyer put up a staying hand, shaking his head at the captain's look of fresh anger.

"I told you I wouldn't doubt it, not that I could prove it," he said. "Don't get any wild ideas, because he's a respected businessman in Los Angeles. He owns property, cattle—Lord knows what all. I don't take to him because he's too smooth, too smiling to suit me. But that's as far as it goes."

"So I'm supposed to be noble and start in again at my beginnings, eh?" the captain snorted. "Well, I'll tell you Jeff, I'm through. I have a few dollars, the ranch will bring a little more. Lizbeth deserves more than she's ever gotten in this sunbaked hellhole." He stalked up and down the small office anger and weariness and frustration saturating him, bursting out in the angry words.

"It was a foolish notion I had in the first place. I'm going back to a place that's civilized, where there's law and

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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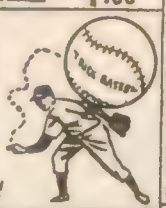

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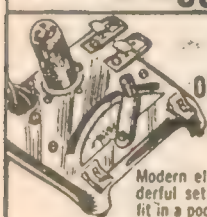

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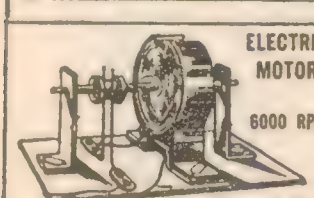

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order and nobody burns down your home and gets off scotfree." He paused, glaring down at the lawyer.

"You stay here with the dust and the dirt, the Mexicans and the Indians, Jeff. Stay here and let the town bums spit at you and call you dirty names. I'm going, so you can sell my place for me to the highest bidder." He went to the door, looking back at the lawyer, still sitting in his swivel chair, his lined face drawn with disappointment.

"I mean it, Jeff. I'm getting out of this forsaken mess. I'll see you before I go." He slammed out the door and went to the horse. Foot in the stirrup he started to mount, feeling the support go from under him and falling backward into the dust. Over the shrill whinny of the black he heard raucous laughter and knew what had happened. As he picked himself up and lifted the saddle back into place, he saw the same knot of men, laughing and slapping each other on the back. The man who had spit on his boots was cleaning his nails with the knife, the knife that had cut the cinch.

The captain stood gripping the saddle, every fiber of him wanting to whirl and fling himself on the grinning no-good, but he fought the desire with all his better judgment. There was Lizbeth to think about. If they hurt her—

Hands white and shaking, he shifted the saddle in place and began to walk the nervous horse down the street to the hotel. Behind him the chorus of catcalls and curses followed him, stinging into his pride.

He led the horse into the livery stable next to the hotel and sold the animal, for half what he had paid. He would leave the pueblo on the stage as

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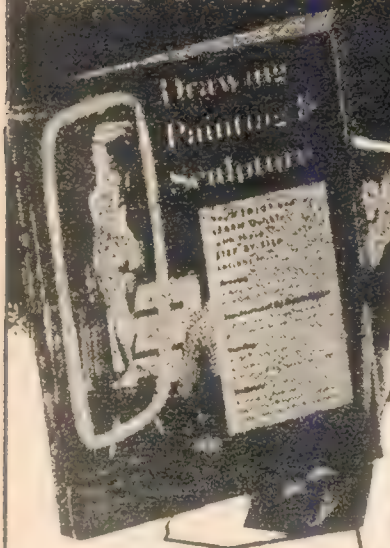

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soon as possible. In the meantime he could walk. No superior could find fault with his strategy, he was sure. With victory an impossibility, you beat as orderly as retreat as you could. Even Jeff Corey would have to concede that.

BACK IN the hotel he found Lizbeth waiting for him, refreshed after her bath, her eyes eager for the news he had. The eagerness died when she saw his face, it must have been that plain to her he had given up.

He told her the whole thing, every bit of it to the cut cinch. And then he stood waiting for her to say something. Knowing that his impatience with her was really anger with himself.

"You think I'm a coward?" he demanded, knowing he should curb his tongue, not meaning anything he said in the heat of his bitterness.

"You think I'm running out, don't you?" He could feel the tight hardness of his mouth.

"No, Layne!" she said in a frightened voice, and then she was holding to him, crying like a child. "I know you're not a coward. I want to go where you go, darling. I'll do anything you say." She meant it, he knew, and the knot inside him relaxed as he tried to kiss away her tears. Without her he didn't know where he would have turned, and he held her to him for a long time, stroking her hair, knowing the terror she must have known in the long years he was away. It had been her fight too, and it must hurt bitterly to give it up, the dream they had shared when they came west five years before. But it was better to waken from the dream now, while there was something to save. It was the only way, she must know that.

There was a stage out the next afternoon, they found after they had eaten supper in the hotel. After that they both bought clothes, and he told the

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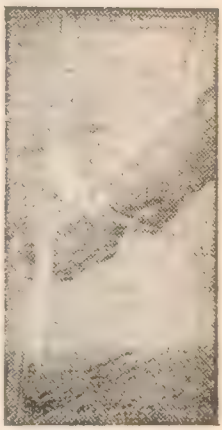

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Over 2,000,000 of these new type storm windows were sold last winter alone. We invite you to try one, too, entirely at **OUR RISK**—no obligation whatsoever for you! When you've **TESTED** it—when you see how easily and quickly it goes on, you'll never again use the heavy, bulky, old fashioned kind! No more back-breaking installation! No more broken glass! It's a new, safe, sure way to winter comfort—for only pennies per window. **TRANS-KLEER** comes in kits 36 inches—**ENOUGH FOR 10 AVERAGE SIZE WINDOWS, AT ONLY $4.95—HARDLY 49½¢ EACH!** In all, you receive **108 SQUARE FEET!**

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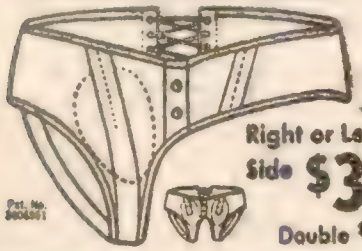

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shopkeeper to burn the tattered uniform, glad to be rid of it. Now, at least he wouldn't stand out so on the street. Lizbeth smiled a little, showing him the new dress she had bought, and admired his cheap suit.

Back in the hotel, she washed her dusty clothes and hung them up to dry. There wasn't much packing to worry about, and they went to bed early, to lie silently with their thoughts. The captain had trouble in getting to sleep, and knew that Lizbeth too was awake for most of the night.

In the morning they ate in the hotel, and then he left her while he went to the bank to withdraw what money was left. It would be a meager beginning back in Connecticut, but anything would be better than what faced them here. The bank president was solicitous, wishing the captain could see his way clear to stay, but—he shrugged and spread fat hands. If that was the way it had to be, then.

Back at the hotel, Lizbeth asked to go with him to Corey's office.

"I want to say goodbye to Jeff," she said, her face expressionless. "He's been a good friend. He helped all he could. We owe him our thanks, Layne."

"I know," he answered coldly. "He can have his thanks in the commission for selling the place." He shouldn't have said that, he knew, but Lizbeth didn't take it up and they walked the short distance to Jeff Corey's office.

THE CAPTAIN almost held his breath, fearing trouble again. But the walk was without incident, except for Waggoner's passing them in his buckboard without a word, in spite of Lizbeth's wave and greeting. The captain said nothing, his eyes straight ahead. It would be over soon, a nightmare they would some day forget.

"I'm sorry, my dear," Corey said, taking Lizbeth's hand in both of his. "I wish it could have been different."

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RACING CAR DRIVER FRANK KOHN SAYS: "THIS REVOLUTIONARY PRODUCT HAS INCREASED MY CAR SPEED & POWER UP TO 50%—STOPPED OIL BURNING"

SAYS RACING DRIVER FRANK KOHN OF PHILADELPHIA:

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At the race in The Philadelphia Municipal Stadium I was driving car #79 with a sportsmen type Ford V8 engine. Right in the middle of the race I began to lose power and speed and was burning up all my lubricating oil and fouling my plugs. I pulled into the pit area during the second heat and in a couple of minutes took out my spark plugs and quickly injected a tube of piston-ring sealer to compete in the third heat. Back in the race my car quickly picked up speed and power, and I was able to go on again even faster than when the car started the race, finished second in the race, and won a Liberty Stock Car Racing Association trophy cup for the season.

The results lasted for over 5,000 grueling miles and when I pulled the engine down later I could still see the sealer.

I have found that Pepgo Ring Seal is a revolutionary development for quickly restoring power and stopping oil waste in a worn automotive engine. I recommend it to all my friends and customers and have been using this miracle product since it was first developed.

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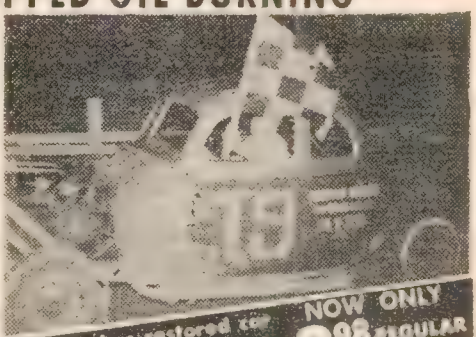
Frank Kohn
Philadelphia, Pa.



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Compression Readings—1945 Dodge Truck

	Cylinder 1	Cylinder 2	Cylinder 3	Cylinder 4	Cylinder 5	Cylinder 6
Before	87 lbs	75 lbs	75 lbs.	60 lbs.	75 lbs.	85 lbs.
After	100 lbs	110 lbs	115 lbs.	95 lbs.	105 lbs	118 lbs.

TEST #2

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A 1948 Pontiac "8" with 77,000 miles was using a quart of oil every 200 to 300 miles.

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Compression Readings — 1948 Pontiac

	Cylinder 1	Cylinder 2	Cylinder 3	Cylinder 4	Cylinder 5	Cylinder 6	Cylinder 7	Cylinder 8
Before	105 lbs.	95 lbs.	107 lbs	120 lbs.	110 lbs.	115 lbs	95 lbs	123 lbs.
After	125 lbs.	120 lbs.	120 lbs.	125 lbs.	122 lbs	120 lbs.	115 lbs	116 lbs.

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"Let's get on with it," the captain said crisply. "There's a paper I sign, I believe, giving you power of attorney. That will take care of selling the ranch." He didn't look directly at Corey, but at the drab walls, the sabres, the few pictures. There was something almost too final about it, and he dreaded shaking hands with the lawyer.

"Take ten percent for your trouble," he finished, as he put his name to the form. It was done now. All the loose ends caught up. It was time to leave.

"I hadn't thought of it as trouble," Corey said, his face drawn and a hurt in his eyes that the captain knew he had made. The lawyer put out his hand and they shook solemnly.

"Good luck," Corey said, "and God be with you both."

Then they were outside, the door closing behind them, everything taken care of. They started down the street, and he noticed two men drift across from the opposite side, joining a group leaning against the rail. Feeling Lizbeth's hand tighten on his own, the captain led her out into the street, thinking to cross and avoid any trouble.

As they did, the group followed suit, slouching across to intersect the captain and his wife. Two men sitting outside a harness shop got up and went inside hastily and the captain swore aloud.

Looking about for help he saw none. The sheriff was probably playing cards in some saloon. There was nothing to do but shoulder through the gang, ignoring the jibes and foul language. They would soon be free of it forever.

"The nigger-lover!" someone called as they approached. The captain clenched his fists, trying to swallow his pride. It was apparent they wanted him to fight. If Warren were back of it, he must not know yet that the captain had quit. Or, the thought came quickly as he saw the surly looks on bearded faces, maybe he wanted to rub

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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it in giving these jackals their fun.

"How *are* those black gals, captain?" another voice rang out. Lizbeth took in her breath and her fingers tightened even more. They were a crafty bunch, the captain knew as they approached. It would be hard.

"Your wife made out too, I can tell you!" That was the bearded, dirty one with the clasp-knife, and the captain slitted his eyes, hatred flaring to the surface. If the man kept on —

"I recollect a right pleasant evening out—"

Tearing from Lizbeth's grasp the captain took a quick step closer to the taunting man, not afraid of the knife, wanting only to sink his fingers into the filthy throat. Stumbling on an outstretched boot, he sprawled on his face on the board walk. He heard Lizbeth cry out, heard her curse the men, and then she screamed.

The captain scrambled to his feet, groaning with the pain of a kick he couldn't dodge, seeing two of the mob mauling Lizbeth as she struggled to get to him. Fear gave him strength and he had nearly reached her when he was pinned from behind, strong arms holding him, roughing him. The man with the knife jerked him around with his free hand and then struck him hard in the stomach. As the captain doubled in pain, the fist lashed out again, hard on the side of his face.

The hands holding him let go and he pitched forward at Lizbeth's feet, fighting to get up and being kicked down each time he made the effort. His wife was sobbing now as the knife-wielder spoke.

"Let the damyankee up, boys," he said, laughing cruelly. "We'll see if the high and mighty captain has blue blood in them veins."

As soon as he was free, the captain lunged at the man, one hand striking at the knife. The surprise of his move catching the man unprepared. The knife clattering on the boards, and an

angry grumble went up at the unwelcome turn of the fight.

Bleeding from his face and the hand that had struck down the knife, the captain was on his opponent, using his hands and his knees, hearing the man squeal in pain. Then as the man retreated, something caught the captain stunningly on the head and he sprawled onto the boards, sick and dizzy. Someone shouted for the knife, and Lizbeth cried again for help.

Pushing with hands that couldn't lift him, he waited for the slash of steel in his back. And over his fear of that was the thought of Lizbeth. He couldn't die now, he couldn't—

The crack of a whip rang in his ears and he made another effort to rise, sure they were beating his wife. Then angry words joined the sound of the whip. He recognized the voice before he saw the man break through the whining circle of men who had gathered to torture him. It was Waggoner, the man whose son had died for the South.

"Damn yellow snakes!" the voice rang out. There were screams of pain. "Call yourselves Southerners!" The whip in Waggoner's hand cut again and the circle thinned. "Stinking polecats is what you are. Clear out or I'll cut every last one of you to ribbons and feed you to the hogs!"

Dazedly the captain made it to his feet as Lizbeth flung herself on him, her hands going to his cut face as she cried softly and repeated his name over and over.

"Stand still, the lot of you," someone else shouted. It was Jeff Corey, two pistols steady in his hands. "Begging your pardon, Waggoner, but I'm going to lock up everyone of these no-goods if I have to take the sheriff's keys at pistol-point. Stand still I said!" he brandished the guns as men began to inch away.

The door of the harness shop opened and the two men came out sheepishly

[*Turn Page*]

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and Jeff Corey yelled for one of them to get the sheriff.

"You all right, Carter?" Waggoner asked, his eyes going to the blood on the captain. The blood and sweat and dirt. "I got to apologize," he went on, his voice tight, his eyes dropping. "When you came back, I figured you had it coming. I know now I was wrong, about everything."

He looked full at the captain. "What I just saw made me sick, ashamed of them and of myself. I want to help you if I can. Anyway I can. I should have done this before now," he finished, putting out a big hand.

SMILING painfully, the captain shook the man's hand, while he held to Lizbeth with the other arm. She was dabbing ineffectually at the cut on his face with a small handkerchief but it felt wonderful.

Leaning against a post, the captain watched as the sheriff showed up, a white-haired man with a scared grin on his face.

"Every damned one of the skunks," the lawyer said, still waving the pistols.

"Give me the whip, Waggoner," the captain said. "There's a little unfinished business I have to attend to." He took the whip from the merchant, and then turned to where the man who had wanted to cut him.

"You can have your choice, my brave hero," the captain told him deliberately. "Tell me whose idea this was, or I'm going to flay the yellow hide off you. I mean it, and I almost hope you don't talk." He shook out the rawhide and the man scuttled aside, holding up his hands to defend himself.

"Warren paid me!" he cried. "I'll swear it on a stack of Bibles. Don't hit me, for God's sake!" he begged.

"I ought to give you a whipping for profaning the Lord's name," the captain said coldly. He handed the whip back to the stableman. There was something to settle with the smooth-

[*Turn To Page 98*]

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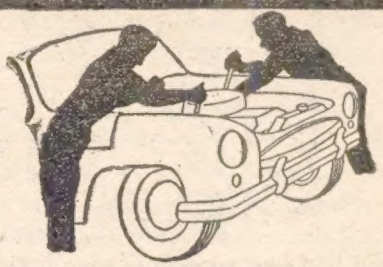

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faced easterner now. He knew that it wasn't north or south that made a man bad. It was the man himself. Waggoner was his friend again. Jeff Corey limped up grinning, the pistols tucked cockily in his belt.

"Let me handle Warren," he said. "You've had enough fighting for one day, Layne. Hasn't he, Lizbeth?"

She nodded, holding close to the captain, and he knew they were right. He had had enough of fighting, he was sure of that. Yet he knew that there were times, always would be, that you had to fight.

"I've got a piece of paper here, I thought you might want back," Corey said. "Now that things have changed a bit." He grinned and held out the power of attorney.

The captain looked down at his wife. "What do you say, Lizbeth?" he asked her.

"Whatever you do, Layne," she told him, but it was in her eyes what she hoped.

Smiling, he turned to Waggoner. The old man had his breath back now, and the tight, cold look was gone from his face.

"Were you serious about that offer a minute ago, Waggoner?" the captain asked. "I'd be needing quite a bit of credit, especially for a damyankee."

"I reckon I think you're good for it," Waggoner said, smiling enough to move the mustaches.

"Well, then, Jeff," the captain said, "looks like you lose your ten percent." The captain tore the paper up into small pieces and gave them to Lizbeth. She tossed them into the air, smiling at him through the dust and tears.

"Welcome home," she said, "welcome home, darling!"

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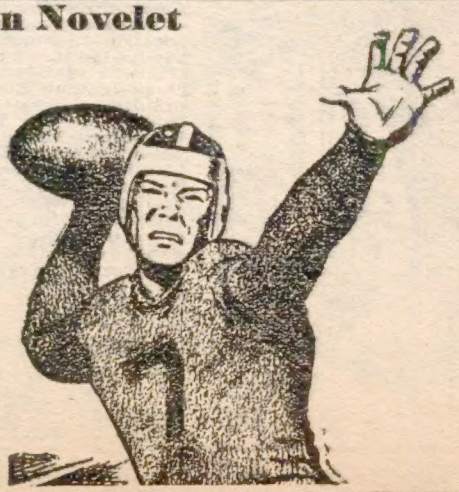

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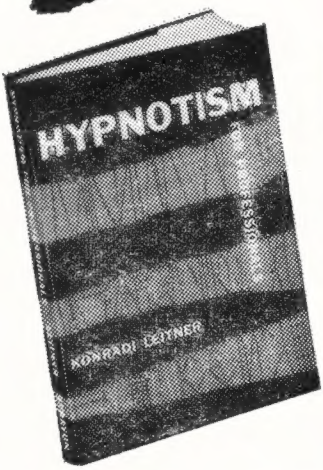

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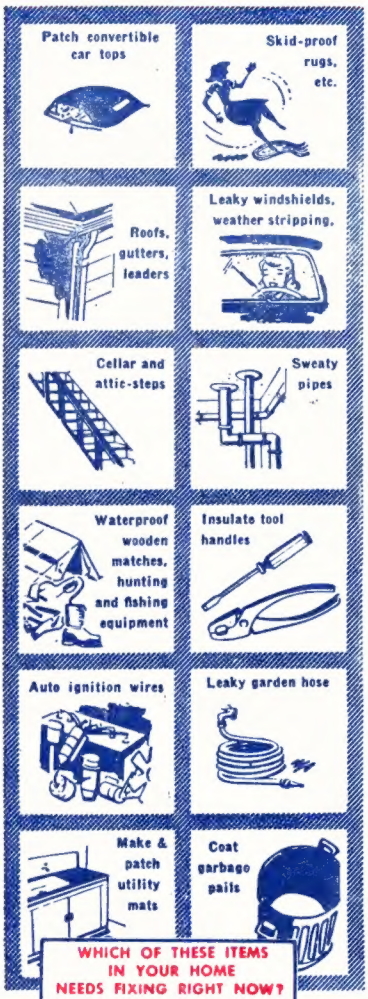

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